

These Changing Times

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Summary: Misao and Sanosuke discover that time not only heals wounds, it can also change your heart.

1. These Changing Times

RK Fanfic: These Changing Times (Chapter 1)

****Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic: These Changing Times****

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to visit Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

****SPOILER WARNING:**** This first chapter contains a couple of minor Kyoto Arc spoilers; if you've at least watched up through episode 52 of the anime (or read through Vol. 15 of the manga), you should be fine. If not, proceed at your own risk. More spoilers may follow as this series progresses; I'll be sure to warn you accordingly.

****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****Chapter 1 - A Surprising Visitor****

"Well, that's it for me," Sanosuke said, rising from his table at the Akabeko. "Thanks for treating me to lunch, Tae."

The brown-haired woman smiled brightly. "It's the least I can do, after you broke up that robbery last night." Her smile wavered, becoming uncertain. "But... I'm afraid after this... you'll have to start paying for your meals... like any other customer..."

Her last sentence was spoken to Sanosuke's retreating back as he sauntered toward the door.

"Hai, hai," he said with a casual wave. "Ja."

Tae sighed in exasperation as he ducked through the low doorway. "That man is going to eat me right out of business," she said to Tsubame, who was cleaning off Sanosuke's table.

Tsubame glanced up nervously at Tae. "But... he does look out for the Akabeko... like last night. You would have lost a lot of money if he hadn't stopped those men. And they might have hurt you, too."

"True," Tae said, looking a little less annoyed. "I guess it's worth it to feed him for free every now and then. I just don't like it when he takes it for granted."

"When who takes what for granted?" Yahiko appeared suddenly behind them, holding a bucket of soapy water.

"Oh, Yahiko-kun, you're here already," Tae said, unfazed, while Tsubame began picking up the dishes she'd dropped on the floor. "Good. You can get started scrubbing the back tables."

"Hai. Oi, Tsubame-chan, you okay?"

"O-of course, Yahiko-kun," Tsubame stammered, blushing. "You just startled me a little."

.....

A fine day, Sanosuke thought, whistling as he walked through the crowded streets. Warm sunshine, a full belly... even a little money in his pocket from his winnings last night. And he'd gotten to use the Futae no Kiwami on those jerks who'd tried robbing Tae after closing time. He chuckled, remembering their terrified faces as their weapons crumbled in their hands. It'd been a while since he had used that technique in a fight, though he hadn't stopped training with it these past two years.

Could it really be two years already? Unbelievable. Time moved so fast in this Meiji Era, as Japan continued to strive to find its place within the larger world. Every day the papers were filled with news about the latest trade agreements signed with other nations, and the advances in medicine and machinery that Japan was receiving from these new alliances. Changes were taking place every day, it seemed.

It was exciting. Sometimes it even made him think about leaving Tokyo. He could travel to Yokohama or Osaka, hop a ship and see what

else the world had to offer.

But the urge usually faded as soon as he made his neighborhood rounds. He spent the better part of most days at Kamiya Doujou, where he was regarded as family. In the two years they'd been married, Kenshin and Jou-chan had created a warm and cheerful home, and Sanosuke was grateful they considered him part of it. He would tease Yahiko and Yutarou while they practiced... play games in the yard with Ayame-chan and Suzume-chan... needle Jou-chan about her cooking (while eating every bite)... bounce little Kintou on his knee while Kenshin did the laundry or worked in the garden.

Usually he stayed for dinner, and sometimes he even helped clean up afterwards. Then it was off to enjoy the Tokyo nightlife... which most nights consisted of drinking, gambling and the occasional meaningless brawl. Sometimes the fights did have meaning, though... like last night at the Akabeko. He grinned again, savoring the memory. Good thing for Tae he'd won at dice... he'd been on his way to spend his winnings at the local brothel when he spotted the would-be thieves breaking into the restaurant.

Even with good deeds like that, he supposed most decent people would think him one broken law away from becoming a criminal himself... if they didn't think him one already. Not that he cared. He enjoyed himself... helped his friends when he could... and didn't hurt anyone who didn't ask for it. All in all, not a bad way to live.

As he approached the doujou, he noticed someone standing at the gate, which was... closed? That's not right, he thought. Usually Kenshin would be home this time of day... Jou-chan, too, considering how pregnant she was and how easily she tired as a result. _Wonder where everybody is?_

He was close enough now to see the figure at the gate--a slim, dark-haired girl in a light green kimono. She had her back to Sanosuke and was knocking on the gate. She stopped periodically, waiting for a response, getting none. He stopped a short distance away and watched her, intrigued and amused by her persistence. After about three minutes she gave up, sighing and picking up what looked like a Western-style suitcase. As she turned to leave, he caught a glimpse of her in profile.

Hmmm... nice shape... cute nose... pretty mouth. Wonder who she is?

She put the suitcase down again and began fussing with her obi, which appeared to be loose. As she tightened it, his jaw dropped.

_Hmmm... __very__ nice shape. Think it's time I met this mystery lady._

He walked briskly toward her. "Can I help you, ojou-san?" he asked, in what he hoped was a well-mannered tone.

She turned to face him, her hair ornament twinkling in the sun. Strange... he didn't appear to have startled her, though he had approached her from behind. She opened her pert mouth as if to answer him, then closed it again. Her eyes--an enchanting mix of blue and green--narrowed as she studied his face. Then they widened in surprise and... recognition?

"Sagara Sanosuke... I thought it was you!" She beamed at him. "Don't you remember me?"

He was speechless. He knew this young beauty? Frantically, he searched his memory.

_She's __definitely__ no whore... not one of Jou-chan's students, either... doesn't work at the Akabeko... think, baka-yarou!_

She quirked an eyebrow, her eyes glinting mischievously. "I can't believe you've forgotten me already," she said, her voice light and teasing. "You're living up to your nickname... chickenhead."

That playful voice... those blue-green eyes... _masaka!_

"You're... Makimachi Misao?" _Little Misao... the weasel girl... impossible!_

She grinned at him, and he caught a glimpse of the skinny little spitfire he'd met in Kyoto... the scrappy Oniwabanshuu ninja who had helped Jou-chan defeat one of the Juppon Gatana... the starry-eyed girl who worshipped her former okashira, Shinomori Aoshi.

He grinned back at her.

"Well, well... you've grown up a bit, Misao-chan. Nice disguise," he teased, eyeing her kimono.

"I could say the same to you," she replied tartly. "No wonder I didn't recognize you at first... you're wearing decent clothes. You might almost pass for a gentleman, if I didn't know better."

What luck that he'd worn the new clothes Yutarou had brought him from Europe today, of all days. He glanced down at his navy jacket, which he wore unbuttoned over a crisp white shirt and gray trousers, which he wore tucked into stiff black boots. The outfit wasn't his style at all, but he'd wanted to surprise Yutarou, who was convinced Sanosuke had either sold the clothes or lost them in a wager.

He winked at her. "A lot can change in two years," he said, bowing deeply. "Shall I take your bag, Misao-_dono_?"

She giggled. "You sound like Himura," she said. "Take my bag where? The gate's locked, and no one answered when I knocked."

"They can't have gone far. These days, Jou-chan can barely make it to the clinic and back without a nap." He smacked his fist in his open palm. "Now I remember! Jou-chan had to see the doctor today, and Kenshin said he was going with her to make sure everything was all right. They're probably on their way back now."

"I hope so," she said. "I'm dying to see them... and to meet their little boy. To think they're parents now... with another baby coming... it's so amazing!" She smiled again, pumping her arms in excitement... a familiar gesture. He must have seen her do that a hundred times during those weeks they had spent at the Aoiya... most often when her beloved Aoshi-sama was around.

In fact, he was surprised that big stiff wasn't here with Misao. Last

time Sanosuke had seen them together, Shinomori had seemed a little more attentive to his exuberant young disciple. Misao's antics had even managed to make Aoshi crack a smile at Kenshin's and Jou-chan's wedding. At the time, Sanosuke had commented to Okina that if Misao-chan could get that statue to smile, then maybe... eventually... she would get him to fully return her affections.

But Sanosuke had no idea what had happened between them since then. Most likely nothing... otherwise, she certainly wouldn't go traveling anywhere without him. And he doubted a careful man like Shinomori would let Misao come to Tokyo alone if she were truly his woman.

After all this time... he still refuses her... Shinomori Aoshi must be blind as well as stupid.

"... at the doujou?"

Sanosuke shook his head slightly, embarrassed that he'd let his mind wander. "Sumanu, Misao-chan... what was that?" he asked sheepishly.

Misao snorted. "Mou! Your hearing is worse than Jiya's." Her eyes twinkled, belieing her scolding tone. "I was asking why you were here. Are you living at the doujou now?"

"Nah. I just visit every day," he said offhandedly. "What brings you here? I'd say from this suitcase," he picked it up, grunting at its weight, "you plan on staying awhile. Follow me..." He began walking around the corner toward the back gate, which he could easily hop over and unlock from the inside. He'd done it so many times the Himuras hadn't bothered to give him a front gate key.

"Actually... I'm here to stay with Kaoru-san until she has the baby," Misao answered as she walked beside him. "Kaoru-san invited me to visit a couple of weeks ago... and Himura wrote me separately to ask if I would stay to help her out until the baby is born. I think he's worried about her... you know how he is... he says she's so tired all the time and could use some cheering up."

She paused as Sanosuke set down her case, vaulted over the gate, released the bolt and opened it for her with a flourish. She giggled again, blushing a little as he watched her walk through.

Even her walk is different... a bit slower... more graceful... She's truly grown up.

As Sanosuke hurried to retrieve the suitcase, she continued, "Jiya thought it was a good idea for me to come... the rest of the Oniwabanshuu, too... they said not to worry about the Aoiya... they'd take care of it... so here I am!" She sat on the edge of the nearest porch, swinging her legs, looking more like the mischievous Misao he'd known in Kyoto. As if she'd read his thoughts, she immediately stopped the motion and sat up straight, a prim expression on her face.

"Thank you very much for letting me in, Sagara-san," she said in a ladylike voice. And for carrying my bag."

His face reddened. _Hmph... now she's acting like I'm a stranger. Did

I offend her somehow?_ He waved his hand dismissively. "No big deal. And you can drop the formalities--'Sagara-san' really doesn't suit me."

She looked flustered. "Well... it's just... you know... more proper. Us not being related or anything..."

Suddenly, he began to understand her unusually demure behavior. _Oh-ho, so Misao-chan the tomboy has been getting lessons in how to be a lady. This should be entertaining._

He put on his most serious, earnest expression. "Oh, you're right, of course. I apologize for being so forward. Should I call you Makimachi-san from now on? Or will Misao-dono do?"

She fell for it, looking relieved, then confused. "Uh... well, I guess Misao-dono... or is that too formal? Himura calls me that... but he's excessively polite..." her voice trailed off as she pondered, lips pursed, brow furrowed in concentration.

Though it took an effort, Sanosuke managed to keep a straight face. "If I might be so bold... may I make a suggestion?"

She looked up hopefully.

He went on in the same polite, helpful tone, "I always thought the title... _itachi musume_... suited you best."

"Oh, that would be fi--" She stopped mid-sentence, her face darkening. "Hey! _What_ did you just call me?"

He doubled over with laughter as she leapt up, fists clenched, face flushed with anger. "_Ko~no--!_ Who's a weasel? I'll kick your ass, chicken-man!"

"Just trying to make you feel at home, Misao-chan!" he called over his shoulder as she began chasing him around the yard. "It's working, too... you're acting more like your normal, violent self now!"

As he ran from her, Sanosuke noted with some admiration that even in a kimono, she moved surprisingly fast. In about a minute or two, she'd caught up with him. But just as she managed to grab hold of his jacket, she lost one of her clogs and tripped, pulling him down with her.

"Still as graceful as ever, eh, weasel girl?" he said, chuckling as he got to his feet, admiring the view from above.

Misao had lost her hair ornament during the chase, causing her familiar braid to come loose. Her face was flushed and sweating, her breathing heavy, her eyes bright with anger and exertion. Her carefully arranged clothing was now askew and dusty. She looked down at herself and wailed:

"My new kimono! And my hair ornament... kuso, where is it?" She glanced around, looking for its telltale twinkle. "Dammit! Sanosuke, you're such a jerk!" She scrambled around a bit on her hands and knees, muttering more curses under her breath.

Sanosuke couldn't help grinning; mused up and pissed off, she was

even more appealing. Misao glanced up at him and growled, "What the hell are you smiling about, baka-yarou? And what are you staring at?" She quickly put one hand up to her neckline, checking to make sure it was still modestly closed.

He bit off a suggestive reply, deciding to spare her further embarrassment. She was acting like her usual tough, angry self, but he hadn't missed the tears glistening in her eyes. It made him feel a little guilty. She'd obviously gone to a lot of trouble to impress everyone, and he'd intentionally messed things up for her. Something about her ladylike decorum had irritated Sanosuke, triggering his usual reaction to people who acted superior to him... like Yutarou or the fox-lady. He would goad and bait them until they tossed their manners and breeding aside and tussled with him on equal ground.

But for some reason, it didn't feel right this time. Probably because he knew Misao wasn't conceited or haughty by nature.

"Gomen nasai, Misao-chan," he said, his face serious. "I was afraid you'd become a little... snobbish. So I made fun of you for it. It wasn't very nice of me."

He held out a hand to her. She looked at him suspiciously, but allowed him to help her to her feet. He walked behind her, bent down, and picked up her hair ornament. He brushed some dirt off it and studied it for a moment, its colored beads gleaming in the sun.

"It's pretty," he said, placing it her hand.

She blushed, looking down at the ground. "Thank you for the apology," she said softly. "But you're right... I guess I was showing off a little. I deserved to be teased for it." She carefully wound the braid back into a bun and tucked the hairpin back in. She then brushed the worst of the dust off her kimono and straightened it. Sanosuke watched her silently, looking away discreetly as she tightened her obi once again.

When he looked back at her, he was amazed to see she was smiling again. "You know," she said impishly, "if I'd been in battle dress, I would've caught you in seconds, not minutes."

He returned the smile, relieved that she'd broken the tension between them. "Heh. I don't doubt it. You've gotten faster since you last chased me in Kyoto. Been training hard?"

"Yup!" She looked proud, even a little cocky. Now that was the Misao-chan he remembered. "I've been practicing every day... Jiya showed me some new moves... Okon's been helping me with my kunai technique... and Aoshi-sama even started me on the..." She abruptly stopped, a shadow crossing her cheerful face for a second. "Well, it's been a busy couple of years," she finished brightly.

Sanosuke's eyes narrowed as he considered the brief, pained expression that had accompanied her remark about Aoshi. _So... she's still pining for that cold bastard. Guess I shouldn't be surprised..._

He was at a loss for what else to say to her when he heard the front gate open. "Hey, there's the happy couple now," he said, raising his

voice. "Oi, Kenshin, Jou-chan, check out who's come to visit!"

-- End Chapter 1 --

2. These Changing Times

RK Fanfic: These Changing Times (Chapter 2)

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****Chapter 2 - Cheerful Face, Hidden Sorrow****

Sanosuke heard the doujou's front gate open. "Hey, there's the happy couple now," he said to Misao, raising his voice. "Oi, Kenshin, Jou-chan, check out who's come to visit!"

Kaoru rounded the corner slowly. "Coming," she panted. "Mou, it's such an effort to get anywhere these days... Who did you say was here, Sanosuke?" As she caught sight of the pair in the yard, her eyes widened.

"M- Misao-chan!" she shrieked, delighted. "Oh, it's so good to see you!"

Misao hurtled forward, throwing her arms around Kaoru, big belly and all. "Kaoru-san! Kaoru-san! It's been too long! I'm so happy to see you!" A few tears trickled down Misao's cheeks, and she brushed them hastily away as she withdrew, studying Kaoru intently. "You're so... so..."

"Pregnant?" Sanosuke interjected, looking amused.

Misao cringed, but Kaoru merely laughed. "Yes, I'm huge," she said, winking at Misao. "I was pretty worried for awhile... thought maybe I was going to have the baby a lot sooner than we expected, but it looks like everything is okay." She sighed, lowering herself onto the porch.

"Let me help you, Kaoru-san," Misao said, but Kaoru waved her

away.

"Don't worry," she said firmly. "I'm fine... just a little slow. It takes me three times as long to do simple things like walk... and sit down. Let me look at you, Misao-chan. Ooh, you've gotten so tall! So beautiful!" she gasped, fingering the sleeve of Misao's kimono. "That kimono suits you perfectly... and your hair! It looks wonderful put up like that... very grown-up."

Misao chuckled. "You sound just like a mother, Kaoru-san," she said. "I guess you've had lots of practice. Speaking of which... where's little Kintou?"

As the question left her lips, a familiar red-headed figure approached them, with a small dark-haired boy cradled against his chest. The man regarded Misao silently for a moment, then smiled sweetly.

"Irasshai de gozaru yo... Misao-dono," Kenshin said, bowing slightly.

Misao's eyes welled again. She hadn't realized how much she had missed them all. "Himura," she said gruffly, "as always, you're too damned polite."

"Sumanu," he said, his smile growing playful. "Shall I try again?" He lay his sleeping son next to Kaoru and gave Misao a bone-crushing hug. She gasped, laughing at his uncharacteristic boldness.

"Jiya couldn't have done better," she said, a little breathlessly. Everyone, including Kenshin, was laughing by this point. Sanosuke clapped Kenshin on the shoulder. "Hey, Kenshin, take a look -- Misao-chan is taller than you now."

"So I see," Kenshin said. "You look well, Misao-dono. How are the rest of the Oniwabanshuu?"

"Everyone's fine. They all send their best wishes for Kaoru-san and the baby. Oh, I have letters for both of you from Omasu and Jiya," Misao said, glancing at her suitcase. "And I brought gifts for everybody, too! Where are Yahiko and Yutarou?"

"Yahiko is working at the Akabeko this afternoon, and Yutarou will be by for dinner and practice." Kaoru gently placed Kintou's head on her lap, stroking his hair as he slept. "I canceled the afternoon classes today because of my appointment, but Yutarou hates to miss a day."

"Sounds dedicated," Misao said. "It'll be great to meet him, after hearing about him in your letters for so long." She quietly approached Kaoru, gazing admiringly at the little boy nestled in her lap. "So that's Himura Kintou. He's beautiful," Misao said, lowering her voice so as not to wake him. "I see he has your dark hair, Kaoru-san."

"He has his mother's eyes as well," Kenshin said fondly, moving next to Kaoru and slipping his arm around her. "Are you tired, Kaoru? This would be a good time for you to take a nap, too. Remember what Genzai-sensei said."

"Yes, I know," Kaoru sighed, yawning. "It's going to be a long couple of months. But at least now there's a possible explanation for why I've been having so much trouble this time around."

The couple looked up to find Misao and Sanosuke staring blankly at them. "What explanation?" they said in unison.

Kenshin scratched the back of his head and let out a little laugh, looking both proud and embarrassed. Kaoru blushed as she said, "Well, Genzai-sensei thinks the reason I've gotten so... er, big... and that I've been so tired and hungry all the time... is because I might be carrying twins."

"T- twins!" Misao gaped at Kaoru, who smiled sheepishly in return. Sanosuke looked surprised as well, but recovered quickly. He grinned and gave Kenshin a resounding thump on the back, sending his smaller friend into a coughing fit. "Damn, Kenshin! Two babies at once," Sanosuke said, looking devilish. "Now that's fast work... but I guess we should expect no less from a master of Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu, ne?"

"Oro?! Sano!" Kenshin protested between coughs, turning bright red. Kaoru and Misao looked at Kenshin... then each other... and burst out laughing.

"Maa, maa... you're all so cruel," Kenshin pouted. "Have you no mercy?"

"Gomen, anata... you're just so _cute_ when you're embarrassed!" Kaoru giggled, throwing her arms around his neck.

"Honto ni," Misao agreed, giving Sanosuke a little shove. "You're so bad," she said, still giggling. "You'd better start behaving, or else I'm keeping the present I brought for you."

Sanosuke's face lit up. "You brought something for _me_?" he said, his voice rising an octave. "What is it? Can I have it now?"

Misao struggled not to laugh at his eager, boyish expression. "Well... I was going to wait until everyone was here," she said hesitantly.

"Aw, c'mon, Misao-chan," Sanosuke cajoled, giving Misao a pathetic, puppy-eyed gaze. She didn't want to admit it, but the effect was irresistible.

"Oh, I suppose... if you absolutely can't wait," she said, sighing in mock exasperation. She bent down to open her case, but Kenshin said, "Why don't you wait until you're settled in your room before you start unpacking, Misao-dono? Here, let me take your--"

"Forget it, Kenshin... that thing's even heavier than Jou-chan," Sanosuke said, picking up the bag effortlessly. "Lead the way."

.....

Later that night, Misao lay on her futon, staring at the ceiling. She was tired from her journey and the long day, yet sleep refused to come. The doujou was much quieter at night than the rowdy Aoiya, yet

she found the silence more unnerving than the cheerful chatter of the inn she called home.

Even though I'm glad to be here, it's still a strange place. She sighed, trying to relax. _Oh well... I'll get used to it soon enough. I'll certainly have enough time to._

She recalled her pleasure at receiving the invitation from Kaoru-san last month. Misao had only been planning on staying for a week, and was writing Kaoru-san to tell her so... until Himura's letter to Jiya had arrived a few days later.

While they were having tea that afternoon, Jiya brought up the letter. "Misao-chan," Jiya said, "I know you were planning on a brief visit with the Himuras. But I'd like you to consider staying with them for awhile."

Misao looked up at him, puzzled. "Why? Is there something wrong?"

The old man sipped his tea, eyeing her over the rim of his cup. "Not exactly," he said after a moment. "I received a letter from Himura-kun today. He's looking forward to your visit, but he's worried about Kaoru-san. Apparently, she's having a difficult pregnancy."

Misao jumped up, splashing tea all over the floor. "Jiya! Don't tell me she's in danger..."

"No, no... that's not what I meant," Jiya said, motioning her to sit down again. "Overall, she and the baby seem to be fine. However, she often feels unwell and tires easily." He pulled Himura's letter out, skimming its contents. "Himura-kun says she's having trouble keeping up with their son, her students and all the work that needs to be done around the doujou. He's helping as best he can, but he's worried because she seems depressed as well."

He began to read:

" 'I know Kaoru has invited Misao-dono to come visit us. My humble request is that she consider staying with us until our second child is born. Misao-dono has always been a source of cheer and comfort to us all, and I'm sure her presence will help lift Kaoru's spirits. If you can spare her for a few months, Okina-dono, I would be extremely grateful.' "

Misao sat quietly, contemplating the empty cup in her hands. A lump rose in her throat. She was touched by Himura's image of her... but it had been a long time since they had seen each other. The cheerful, optimistic Misao he remembered... well, she had started to question whether that Misao existed anymore. After all that had happened that night weeks before... she didn't know whether she could ever be that carefree again.

Jiya's gentle, firm voice interrupted her reverie.

"Misao-chan, I promised Omasu and Okon I would leave you alone. But I can no longer keep quiet, watching you suffer. I won't ask why you've been so unhappy these past weeks... but I will say that I think this trip will do you as much good as it will Kaoru-san and Himura-kun. I

know it's selfish of me, but that's why I want you to go."

She met his eyes, warm with love and sympathy. Her own grew moist. With an effort, she pushed the tears back and said in a strong voice, "All right. I'll write to Himura right away. It will be good to see my Tokyo friends again."

He reached over and gave her one of his powerful hugs. She returned his embrace fiercely, murmuring, "What would I do without you, Jiya?"

"Ah, my little Misao," he said, his voice thick. "I just want you to be happy. Promise me you'll enjoy yourself while you're gone... I won't miss you quite as much if I know you're having fun."

She smiled at the doujou ceiling. Jiya was right... it had been a good idea to get away from Kyoto for awhile. She'd be sure to write him first thing tomorrow to let him know she'd arrived safely... and that she was having a good time already.

She chuckled to herself, recalling how utterly astonished everyone at the doujou had been by her grown-up appearance. She thought Yahiko was going to pass out when he realized the pretty lady he and Yutarou were showing off for was the same Misao he used to delight in tormenting. He barely said a word to Misao at dinner, but she'd caught him staring at her in disbelief throughout the meal.

Her sudden physical maturity had taken her fellow Oniwabanshuu by surprise as well. Not to mention Misao herself, who had pretty much accepted that she would look like a 12-year-old forever and wasn't all that unhappy about it. Then, seemingly overnight, she had grown several inches and developed a woman's figure. It was shocking, to say the least.

Thank goodness for Okon and Omasu, who quickly took it upon themselves to help Misao adjust, modifying her training to take advantage of her growth spurt while at the same time teaching her how to behave -- and dress -- more like a lady. At first, she'd resisted, hating the stifling clothing she had to wear, the deferential manners they forced her to practice.

But she had to admit, there were times when it was nice to be treated like a grown woman, instead of a little girl. She closed her eyes, and the image of Sanosuke addressing her at the doujou gate appeared before her. She'd only been half-joking when she said she almost didn't recognize him. He'd been so well-dressed and polite... respectful... handsome, even... those deep brown eyes of his glowing with admiration as he spoke to her.

She blushed at the memory. She never recalled Sanosuke looking quite that attractive when they were all together in Kyoto. But then, she had eyes for only one man back then--

... Aoshi-sama... Aoshi-sama... why? Why can't you...

Not again. She gritted her teeth, fighting the urge to cry. _Dame! No more tears. No more wasted time crying over him. I promised Jiya I'd cheer up, and dammit, I'm going to! For everyone's sake, I have to try..._

She closed her eyes, but all she could see was his beautiful, impassive face... his eyes, as blue as the sky and twice as distant... his silky black hair waving gently in the breeze that blew the night she'd last seen him, over a month ago.

His cold farewell still echoed in her ears.

... Misao... there's nothing between us... and there never will be...

... Sayonara ...

She was losing her battle. The tears spilled over, burning down her cheeks, dripping into her ears. She turned on her side, burying her face in her hands.

Damn you, Aoshi... you arrogant, icy bastard... I hate you!

Quivering, she sobbed into her cupped hands, wishing it were true.

-- End of Chapter 2 --

3. These Changing Times

RK Fanfic: These Changing Times (Chapter 3)

****Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic: These Changing Times****

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, click <http://www2.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****Chapter 3 - The Teacher Appears ****

Misao whistled cheerfully as she scrubbed the last of the breakfast dishes, keeping time with Yahiko and Yutarou as they counted off their shinai swings in the front yard. From the other side of the building, she could faintly hear Kenshin laughing and singing with Ayame-chan and Suzume-chan, their chatter occasionally mingled with Kintou's delighted gurgles and shrieks.

Misao smiled. Though she'd gotten little sleep, the bustling energy of the doujou was rubbing off on her. She'd sweep the porches next, then see about helping Himura with the laundry.

As Misao wiped her hands on her apron, she stepped outside to watch Kaoru and her two best students practice Kamiya Kasshin Ryu. Kaoru was working with Yahiko, making subtle adjustments to his grip as Yutarou watched closely. Misao noted with satisfaction that both boys were wearing the hand guards she'd given them as presents from Kyoto.

Yahiko practiced with the modified grip his sensei had just shown him, a smile spreading across his face as he noted the difference. "You're right, Kaoru -- it feels much better," he said, sounding a bit sheepish.

Kaoru sighed in exasperation. "I would think after all this time you would know better than to question me, Yahiko," she said sharply. "You're at an age where you're growing very quickly. As that happens, you'll need to make adjustments in your grip and your stance to compensate."

"He doesn't look any taller, Kaoru-sensei," Yutarou said, smirking. "Maybe it's just his head that's gotten bigger."

"Teme!" Yahiko gritted his teeth, advancing on Yutarou and prodding him with his shinai. "Your mouth gets bigger every day! Why don't you let your sword do the talking for a change?"

"Gladly," Yutarou hissed, dropping his shinai into ready stance.

Misao covered her mouth to stifle the giggles that threatened. Kaoru had started to grin as well, but she quickly donned a more serious face. "Stop it, both of you," she scolded, glaring at them. "You'll have plenty of chances to fight later on. Right now, you both should be quiet and pay attention. You might actually learn something."

"Gomen, Kaoru-sensei," Yutarou said, dropping his shinai at his side and bowing slightly.

"Sumanu, sensei," Yahiko mumbled, red-faced.

Kaoru's eyes brightened victoriously. She then glanced up and saw Misao watching them from the porch. "Ohayou, Misao-chan," Kaoru said, her greeting echoed by her two students.

"Ohayou, minna. How do they feel?" Misao said, gesturing toward the boys' hands.

"Great!" Yahiko beamed and flexed his wrists for emphasis.

"They really do. Thanks again, Misao-san," Yutarou said, bowing respectfully.

Kaoru turned toward her students. "I want 500 swings from both of you. Pay attention to your grip, Yahiko. Begin now!"

Yahiko grumbled, but began swinging in time with Yutarou. Kaoru

sighed and sat heavily on the porch. Misao dropped to her knees next to Kaoru. "Nice job, sensei," Misao said, grinning. "Do they do that often?"

"What, fight? Every damn day," Kaoru said grimly. "I only put up with it because their rivalry drives them forward. It's good for their training. Besides, it's not as if they hate each other. They're like brothers that way." She called out, "That's it, Yahiko. You've got it."

Yahiko grinned, continuing his count a bit more forcefully.

"He's so cocky it's aggravating," Kaoru said, half to herself. "It makes it hard to compliment him... it tends to go to his head quickly. But he has a right to be confident. He's a fine swordsman."

The last statement was so quiet Misao barely caught it. She glanced at her friend. "Why, Kaoru-san... are you crying?" she said, whispering so as not to draw attention to them.

"A little," Kaoru said, hastily wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her gi. "I tend to do that a lot lately. Genzai-sensei says sometimes that happens with pregnant women... they get overly sentimental." She laughed a little. "Silly, isn't it?"

Misao remembered what Jiya had told her about Himura's letter.

... he's worried because she seems depressed as well...

"Kaoru-san?"

"Nani?"

Misao watched her closely. "Is something troubling you? I mean, more than feeling sentimental... is there something worrying you?"

Kaoru's smile trembled a bit, then brightened. "Of course not!" she said, laughing. "The doujou is doing fine... everyone's healthy... Kenshin and Kintou are wonderful... and now you're here. What could I possibly have to be upset about?"

She rose slowly, still smiling. "Thank you for asking, Misao-chan... but you don't need to need to worry about me." She patted Misao's hand and walked toward Yahiko and Yutarou, who were finishing their swings. "All right! You have time for one match before our morning class starts arriving. Winner will get two pieces of the chocolate Misao-chan brought me from Kyoto."

"Yatta!" Yahiko chortled greedily. "Get ready for me to whip your butt, cat-eyes," he sneered, taking a defensive stance.

"In your dreams, monkey-face," Yutarou retorted. "Here I come!"

Kaoru watched them spar, chuckling and occasionally shouting advice to one or the other. Misao's eyes narrowed as she observed them. Kaoru's sadness did indeed appear to have vanished. But Misao, of all

people, knew that it took more than a big smile and cheerful words to erase a person's deepest sorrows and worries.

I know something's bothering her. It may take some time, but I'll find out what it is...

.....

"Minna! Lunch is ready!" Misao began ladeling miso soup into bowls, as Kenshin came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of rice balls.

"Ahh... looks like I came just in time," Sanosuke said, rubbing his hands together. "Smells great, Misao-chan."

Misao glowered at him. "You're welcome to eat lunch with us," she said. "But... only if you help me with some chores afterward. I don't tolerate freeloading!" She pointed a finger a couple of inches away from his nose for emphasis.

Sanosuke assumed a wounded expression. "Freeloader? Me? You've got me all wrong. Why, I'm always willing to help out around here! Right, Kenshin?"

Kenshin chuckled nervously. "Well... maybe sometimes..."

Yahiko snorted. "Yeah, right... you do about as much work as Kintou there," he said around a mouthful of rice ball, jerking his thumb back at the corner where Kaoru was sitting and rocking the baby after his feeding.

Yutarou snickered, then yelped as Sanosuke smacked the back of his head. "Urusai, rich boy," he growled, sending Yahiko into his own snickering fit.

"Hey, keep your hands to yourself, chicken-head!" Yutarou yelled, jumping on the taller man's back and pounding him on the head.

"Oh, that really hurts," Sanosuke said mockingly, pulling Yutarou off by the back of his gi and dangling him in the air. This made Yahiko laugh even harder... until Sanosuke dropped Yutarou into his lap. Soup and rice flew in all directions.

"Oi! Baka! That was my lunch!" Yahiko shrieked, shoving Yutarou to the ground and hurling his soup bowl at Sanosuke. The fighter sniffed contemptuously, raising his hand to block the bowl. The minute the dish touched his fingertips, it crumbled to dust.

"Show-off," Yahiko said sullenly, sticking his tongue out at Sanosuke. He merely grinned in return as the two boys trudged off to the well to clean up.

Kenshin's mouth twitched as he struggled not to laugh. "Maa, maa, Sano... keep that up and we won't have any dishes left," he said, feigning distress.

Sano shrugged. "Beats washing 'em," he said, winking at Misao. "But, since I don't have any money to buy you new ones, I suppose I'll help you clean these up the hard way."

Misao laughed. "I see there's never a dull moment here," she said as she helped Sanosuke gather the empty dishes. "Especially when you're around."

"Heh. Guess you could say that," Sanosuke said, flashing that familiar devilish grin. As they walked to the kitchen, Misao noticed a different sheen to the red headband he wore.

"Oh! You're wearing it," she exclaimed.

His smile broadened. "Of course," he said, stopping to pose in the sun. "How does it look?"

"Good... but you already knew that," Misao said teasingly, recalling the previous evening.

She had been overjoyed by how enthusiastically everyone had received their gifts during dinner. Kaoru had raved over the beautiful dark blue and white kimono, complete with matching obi and ribbon. And Kenshin's eyes had nearly popped out of their sockets when he saw his own new clothes -- a dark blue gi with embroidered white trim, and white hakama trimmed with the same shade of blue as the gi.

Kaoru was as delighted with her husband's gift as she had been with her own. "They're beautiful," she sighed blissfully. "Kenshin, you'll look so handsome... and with my new kimono, we'll be a perfect match!"

"That was the idea," Misao said. "I hope Himura doesn't think it's too much. Ne, Himura?"

He looked up quickly, seeming dazed. "Arigatou de gozaru, Misao-dono," he said in his quiet way, his wide smile indicating how truly pleased he was with the clothes.

But it was Sanosuke's reaction she'd enjoyed the most. After he badgered her for most of the previous afternoon, Misao had relented and given him Jiya's gift -- a jug of the Aoiya's best sake -- before dinner. But she held back the red silk headband she and Omasu had found one day while shopping for a ribbon to match Kaoru's kimono. Omasu had pointed it out to Misao, saying it reminded her of "Himura-san's handsome gangster friend."

Misao had examined it doubtfully. "I don't think Sanosuke would wear something that fancy," she said. "He'll better appreciate the sake Jiya is sending him."

"Still, it's such a lovely shade of red," Omasu said, sighing. "It would really compliment those sexy eyes of his."

Misao rolled her own eyes, remembering the shameless amount of flirting Sanosuke had done with both Omasu and Okon during his stay in Kyoto. "Well, why don't you get it for him?" Misao grinned teasingly. "And when I give it to him, I'll tell him exactly what you just told me."

"Misao-chan! You know that wouldn't be proper," Omasu protested, giggling all the while. "But let's buy it and say it's a gift from everyone at the Aoiya. I think he'll like it, despite what you said."

Omasu turned out to be right. Sanosuke had uttered a low, long whistle as he unwrapped the headband, his face glowing with pleasure. "My, my... you have good taste, Misao-chan," he said, running his fingers over the fabric. "This is too fine for the likes of me."

Misao suddenly found it difficult to look at Sanosuke. Something about his deep voice... his soft eyes on hers as his long fingers stroked the red silk... left her flushed and breathless.

She swallowed. "Funny, I told Omasu the same thing when she showed it to me," she said evenly, busying herself with the teapot. "Would anyone like more tea?"

The chorus of assents gave Misao time to regain her composure. After she set the pot down, she looked at Sanosuke. He'd stopped admiring the headband and was gazing intently at her instead. She felt the color rise in her cheeks again.

"Arigatou gozaimasu, Misao-chan," he said, his voice as smooth and rich as the silk in his hands.

The polite response flustered her further. "D... dou itashimashite," she managed to respond, knowing she should stop staring like a ninny, yet unable to tear her eyes away from his serious, intense face.

Damn, he's attractive... and the way he looks at me... am I imagining things, or does he--

As if he'd read her mind, he gave her a sly half-smile that set her insides quivering.

To make matters worse, Yahiko chose that moment to say loudly, "Oi, Misao -- what's with the face? Did you swallow something bad?"

Misao was mortified, not to mention aggravated. Thankfully, before her temper got the best of her, Kenshin interrupted them.

"You must be tired from your journey, Misao-dono," he said. "Why don't you go get some rest?"

"But I should help clean up," she protested. "That's what I'm here for."

"Sano and I can handle that," Kenshin said, glancing at his friend, who quickly chimed in, "Uh... sure, sure. Go ahead, Misao-chan. Oyasumi. Mata ato de."

Misao flushed, remembering the gleam in Sano's eye as he wished her good night...

.....

"Something wrong, Misao-chan?"

The concern in Sanosuke's voice brought Misao back to the present. "N- no, not at all!" she said, briskly dropping the lunch dishes into the kitchen wash basin. As she reached for the dish cloth, Sano

grabbed it first.

"Here. Let me do that," he said, fixing her with that unnerving gaze again. "You've been at it nonstop all morning. Why don't you sit down here and keep me company?" He motioned toward the nearby counter.

Misao was dumbfounded. Sanosuke the loafer was actually volunteering to work! It added to the suspicion that begun to form in her mind last night after their exchange over dinner. It seemed impossible, but...

Is he acting this way because... because... he's interested in me? As a woman?

He turned to her, dish cloth in hand, flirtatious grin in place. And suddenly she remembered a similar scene from long ago at the Aoiya... Okon scolding Sanosuke... his teasing laugh as he snatched the dish cloth away from her and turned to the basin...

Misao scowled, feeling young and foolish.

_That's ridiculous... he flirts this way with __all__ women... whether he's interested or not... look at the way he was in Kyoto with Okon and Omasu. I've got to stop acting like such an idiot around him!_

She marched over to the basin and picked up a towel. "I can't just sit here while you work," she said, smiling in a casual, friendly way. "You wash. I'll dry."

"Deal," Sanosuke said, handing her the first dish with a wink.

.....

Before Misao knew it, a whole week had passed, then two. Her days settled into a schedule, dominated by her two main chores: shopping and cooking. Thanks to Okon's patient, persistent instruction, Misao had become a pretty good cook, and Kaoru was relieved to surrender a duty neither she nor anyone else enjoyed having her do.

Each morning, Misao would normally wake before everyone else and meditate before heading to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Aoshi-sama had taught her a few simple Zen meditations, but she usually couldn't sit still long enough to finish them. She settled for closing her eyes and breathing deeply for a few minutes, concentrating on quieting the wayward thoughts that would start galloping through her brain the moment she awakened. When she started fidgeting, or thinking of Aoshi-sama, she would end the meditation. Sometimes she even made it as long as five minutes without his name or image entering her mind.

She was grateful that most of the time, she was too busy to think. After breakfast, she would plan the rest of the day's meals, writing down the ingredients she needed. If the list was long, she would recruit Kenshin and Kintou to come shopping with her. She would carry the baby, while Kenshin handled the groceries. She vastly preferred their company over shopping alone, but only asked for Kenshin's help when she absolutely needed it. She knew he preferred to stick close

to home and keep an eye on Kaoru, in case she should need anything.

After lunch, Kaoru usually took a nap with Kintou before afternoon classes began. At first, Misao had looked for work to do around the doujou while they slept. But after a few days, Kenshin had encouraged her to take the time for herself. "You deserve a break too, Misao-dono," he said. "Why, you haven't even had time to practice! Okina-dono will be upset with us if we keep you from your training."

Misao knew Jiya wouldn't care much, since he'd never really wanted her to join the Oniwabanshuu in the first place. But she was determined to keep her skills sharp. So every subsequent afternoon, she headed for a nearby field to practice her kempo and kunai-throwing. She brought her grandfather's kodachi along as well. Even though she only knew a few basic stances, she liked to practice them. The graceful movements brought her a sense of peace, and the weight of the sword in her hand made her feel connected with the grandfather she barely remembered.

After a couple of hours of training, Misao would return to the doujou, take a bath and start preparing dinner. By the time the last dish was wiped and put away, she couldn't wait to collapse onto her futon. After the first few nights, she had no trouble sleeping soundly.

It was a simple life, much like the one she had led in Kyoto. But her Tokyo companions were more lively, to say the least. Yahiko and Yutarou were constantly arguing and competing, but they often joined forces to play pranks on their fellow Kamiya Kasshin Ryuu students... not to mention Sanosuke and, occasionally, even Kenshin. Once they got used to Misao's presence, they included her in their mischief as well, which delighted her. She and Jiya used to play jokes on each other all the time, but as Misao got older, the pranks had stopped. She relished the opportunity to pull some of her best practical jokes on new victims. She quickly won the grudging respect of the two boys, and they spent much of their time plotting revenge for her tricks.

Misao also spent a lot of time caring for Kintou while Kaoru was teaching. He was a cheerful, energetic baby, always chuckling and crawling around, getting into things. Misao invented countless games to keep him amused and out of trouble. He adored the pinwheels and puppets Kuro had made for him, but he was just as happy when Misao made funny faces and sang to him, bouncing him in her arms and swinging him around.

Kintou quickly learned to recognize her, reaching out to her and squealing whenever she approached him. She would laugh in return, feeling a kind of joy she hadn't known existed. She loved Kintou completely, and was awed that Kaoru-san and Himura had not only produced this one perfect child, but were about to produce two more.

And then there was Sanosuke, with whom Misao had formed an easygoing friendship. Shortly after Misao arrived at Kamiya Doujou, Sanosuke started showing up earlier in the morning, often staying until bedtime. Sometimes he would just sit around and chat with Kenshin or roughhouse with Yahiko and Yutarou. But mostly, he trailed after

Misao, who quickly put him to work fixing leaks, loose floor boards and other breakdowns around the doujou. He did every task she demanded without complaint... as long as she stayed to help him or talk with him while he worked. Occasionally, Sano also accompanied Misao on her morning shopping trips, relieving Kenshin of the grocery-carrying duty.

He was amusing, good-natured company, and Misao found herself looking forward to their daily bantering. She was disappointed on the rare days when Sano didn't arrive at the doujou until later in the afternoon, while she was out training. That meant she only saw him at dinner. Though she would never admit it publicly, she missed his companionship on those days. She often wondered what he did when he wasn't at the doujou, but was afraid to ask him. Most likely it was something disreputable, like gambling or fighting. She wouldn't even allow herself to think about any women he might be seeing. It was none of her business, after all.

It was one of those days when she first met Unmei. She had set up some targets for kunai practice, and had just finished throwing a set when she sensed someone watching her.

Wonder if it's Sano... baka-yarou... he knows I hate it when he watches me train. He makes me nervous...

Misao whirled around, ready to berate her delinquent friend... and saw a tiny, shriveled old woman staring at her. She was leaning on the arm of a much taller young man, who had black hair and the same sharp, dark eyes as the old woman. She smiled toothlessly.

"Not bad, young lady," she said, her voice thin and wavering with age. "You have a strong arm... though your form could use some refining. Your hand movements are too flashy... they waste precious seconds. Smaller gestures are the key..."

Misao gaped at the old lady. It was exactly the kind of advice Okon would have given her. _What the hell...?_ "Ano... how do you know so much about throwing kunai?"

The old woman cackled. "My, my... where have young people's manners gone? Such a direct question, young lady," she said, her dark eyes twinkling.

"Sumimasen. I didn't mean to offend you," Misao said, bowing slightly. "It's just unusual for a total stranger to walk up to me and start giving me pointers."

"True, true... that wasn't very polite of me, now, was it?" The old lady chortled again. "Well, I guess I lost my head for a moment. It's not every day I see a young woman practicing the arts of the onmitsu... especially out in the open, in broad daylight... my curiosity got the better of me."

Misao's eyes widened further. "You know I'm onmitsu?"

"Of course," the old woman said, smiling mysteriously. "I recognize my own kind... though it's been countless years since I donned my own battle gear."

"You're former onmitsu?" Misao gasped. "Then... you must know of my

group, the Oniwabanshuu!"

"Ahh, yes... I've heard of the great Oniwabanshuu of Kyoto..." the old woman said, a faraway look in her eyes. She shook her head sharply, returning her focus to Misao. "But we have not introduced ourselves! My name is Takashi Unmei... and this is my grandson, Toushi." She patted the young man's arm.

"Hajimemashite," Toushi said, bowing. His impassive expression did not change.

Misao bowed in response. "Makimachi Misao," she said. "Douzo yoroshiku."

Unmei cocked her head, staring at Misao with those birdlike eyes. "How interesting that we should meet this way. I take it that you have been training by yourself?"

Misao nodded. "I'm staying with friends in Tokyo," she said, "but I don't want to get out of practice."

Unmei smiled. "Misao-chan... how would you like to continue your training under my instruction? I have a doujou not far from here where my family has been training the Tokyo version of your Oniwabanshuu for generations. I would be honored if you would allow me to help you further hone your onmitsu skills."

Misao's head spun. It seemed so strange... this woman appearing out of nowhere and offering to train her. Yet, it reminded her of an old saying she heard Aoshi-sama repeat not too long ago: something about the teacher appearing when the student is ready to learn.

She was ready. Maybe now she would learn how to properly use the weapon her grandfather had passed down to her... the kodachi that hung sheathed at her side.

She bowed deeply. "I gratefully accept your generous offer. Arigatou gozaimasu."

Unmei smiled warmly, beckoning Misao closer. "See that peaked roof in the distance? That's my doujou, where we teach the Takashi style of kempo. Toushi can give you clearer directions... his young eyes see much better than mine."

"Where are you staying, Makimachi-san?" Toushi asked.

"Kamiya Doujou," Misao replied.

"Oh, that's not far at all," he said, proceeding to explain the way to the Takashi doujou.

Misao glanced at the sky. "It's getting late," she said. "Can I come tomorrow? After lunch?"

"I'll be expecting you," Unmei said. "Until tomorrow, then, Misao-chan."

"Hai. Mata ato de," Misao called, waving as she bolted up the path.

Unmei and Toushi watched her black braid bobbing as she slowly faded from view. "By the Buddha... she's the spitting image of Sorata... and Akihito," Unmei said, sighing. "That hair... and those eyes! She's a bold, spirited one... has her grandfather's temper as well, I'll wager."

Toushi studied his grandmother. "Are you having second thoughts, Obaa-san?"

Unmei's eyes crackled with anger. "Of course not," she snapped. "I've been waiting for this day for 13 years... the day when my son's disgrace will finally be avenged."

She smiled maliciously. "That day is almost here. Prepare yourself... Shinomori Aoshi..."

-- End of Chapter 3 --

4. These Changing Times

RK Fanfic: These Changing Times (Chapter 4)

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This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

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****Chapter 4 - Cries in the Night ****

"Tasukete!"

The frantic scream shattered Sanosuke's concentration. He dropped the dice he'd been holding and jumped up, growling in frustration.

"Che," he grouched. "Doesn't anyone ever sleep around here? Better go see what's going on. Kouji, take care of that roll for me, would you?"

"Hai, Sano -- but shouldn't we be coming with you?" Kouji said hopefully.

Sano grinned, cracking his knuckles. "Nah. This shouldn't take long. If she's single, I'll bring her back to meet you, ne?" The other men burst out laughing, as Kouji grinned sheepishly in return.

Sanosuke left the gambling hall quickly, glancing around for the source of the cry. He couldn't see anyone, but he heard a faint sobbing sound coming from a nearby alley. He approached silently, not wanting to further frighten whoever it was. When he rounded the corner, however, his eyes widened in astonishment.

"Tsubame-chan!"

The young girl was lying on her side, her face contorted in pain. Sano raced up to her, gently rolling her on her back. His breath caught. "What the hell...?" he whispered.

Tsubame was a mess. Her kimono was filthy and torn. One sleeve was missing completely, revealing an ugly gash on her shoulder. Her face was bruised and streaked with tears. Her eyes fluttered open, dark with terror... and she gave a little scream.

"Shh... it's all right, Tsubame-chan... it's me, Sanosuke," the fighter whispered soothingly, stroking the frightened girl's hair. "I heard you call for help... what happened?"

"Sanosuke-san," Tsubame whispered, relieved. Tears began running down her cheeks again. "Sanosuke-san... Tae-san is in terrible trouble..." She tried to rise, but cried out in pain. "Onegai... she needs help right away..." she panted as Sano placed his hand behind her back to support her.

"Tae's in trouble?" Sano felt something warm and sticky on Tsubame's back, and smelled the familiar tang of fresh blood. His whole body went cold.

... shit... she's been stabbed! She needs a doctor... fast!

"Daijoubu, Tsubame-chan," he said, fighting to keep his voice calm. "I'll help her... as soon as we get you to Genzai-sensei. Be brave... I'm going to pick you up now. I'll try to be gentle... but it may hurt a bit." He slowly slid one arm around her shoulders, but she grabbed his other hand frantically.

"Dame!" Tsubame moaned, her tearful brown eyes fixed imploringly on Sanosuke. "Don't worry about me... onegai... please save Tae-san..."

Sanosuke exhaled sharply in frustration. "Kouji! Akira! Get out here now!" he bellowed.

Within seconds, Sano's friends dashed into the alley. "Hai, Sano!" Kouji said, gasping as he saw Tsubame lying on the ground. "Is this the girl --?"

"There's no time... she needs to get to Oguni Clinic now!" Sano said, swiftly picking Tsubame up and handing her to Kouji. "Something's up at the Akabeko... so I'll leave her to both of you... haiyaku!"

"Wakatta... don't worry, we'll take good care of her!" Kouji said, motioning with his head for Akira to follow. The two men hurried down the street, while Sano took off for the Akabeko as fast as he could run. With every step his fury grew.

What kind of twisted bastard would do something like that to an innocent girl? And Tae... if she's been hurt, too... I'll be cracking some skulls before the night is over!

Several minutes later, Sanosuke burst through the Akabeko's open doorway... and into a crowd of policemen.

"Yokatta," Sanosuke said, gasping for breath. "Did you... catch... the scumbags... who hurt Tsubame-chan?"

The officers stared at Sanosuke. "Who are you?" one of them asked, eyeing Sano suspiciously. He suddenly realized what a bizarre sight he must be, barging in with his hands and gi smeared with Tsubame's blood. Before he could answer, a familiar voice intoned--

"That is Sagara Sanosuke." The cool disdain with which his name was spoken made Sano's blood boil. "He's no one of consequence. Continue your investigation..."

Sanosuke marched past the policemen toward the source of that hateful voice. Sure enough, there stood Fujita Goro... otherwise known as former Shinsen Gumi Third Division Captain Saitou Hajime. He flicked ash from his cigarette and smirked at Sano.

"Ahou," the tall, lanky officer said, exhaling a cloud of smoke in Sanosuke's direction.

"Kisama," Sanosuke snarled. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Feh," Saitou said, shaking his head. "I would think it would be obvious even to a moron like you. I'm a policeman... a crime has been committed... thus, I am investigating the crime. Was that simple enough for you to understand?"

As always, Sanosuke was overwhelmed by the urge to plant his fist in Saitou's face. No one had the power to piss him off like Kenshin's old enemy. But... the asshole was a police officer, not to mention a first-rate swordsman. Sanosuke knew that for now, it was smarter to let the insult go, no matter how much it galled him.

"What crime?" Sanosuke looked around. "Where's Tae? Is she okay?"

"No," Saitou said, his smirk disappearing. "I'm sorry to say she's not. Follow me..."

Sanosuke felt the same sick, cold sensation he'd had when he found Tsubame in the alley. _No... she can't be..._ He shook his head sharply as Saitou entered the kitchen, looking over his shoulder to make sure Sanosuke was still following. The younger man hurried into the kitchen, where a few blankets had been spread out over the floor. Lying on the makeshift bed was Tae.

Sanosuke gasped. He barely recognized the Akabeko's proprietress. Her badly beaten face was distorted with lumps and bruises, and one eye was completely swollen shut. Her breathing was labored, and every now and then she twitched in her sleep, whimpering softly.

"How... how did this happen?" Sanosuke whispered fiercely, clenching his fists. "What kind of monsters did this to her?"

Saitou shrugged slightly. "So far we've found nothing except the Akabeko's empty cash box. It's clear there was a robbery. What doesn't make sense is why the thieves would go this far." He looked down at Tae, the glint in his amber eyes the only outward sign of his anger. His voice carried a hint of disgust as he observed--

"Whoever did this... did it out of pleasure, rather than necessity."

Sanosuke clenched his teeth and swallowed against the urge to smash something... anything. "She's not the only one who got hurt," he said. "I found Tsubame, one of the Akabeko waitresses, in an alley not too far from here. She'd been stabbed as well as beaten. I had some friends of mine take her to Oguni Clinic."

"Then she's still alive?" Saitou asked calmly. "If so, I'd like to interview her as well as Sekihara-san as soon as possible. They appear to be the only witnesses we have."

"Maybe not," Sanosuke said. "I'm wondering if this robbery had anything to do with the one I broke up a couple weeks ago. Hey... how come your guys never came to talk to me about that?"

Saitou stared blankly at Sanosuke. "There was an attempted robbery here before this?" he asked, dropping his cigarette on the floor and stepping on it.

"Yeah," Sano said, studying the officer closely. If he didn't know better, he'd almost say Saitou looked... stunned. "I figured you knew all about it, with your sources and all. That police guy who came in afterwards told me he'd let you know what had happened, and that someone would be contacting me later on to get the full story. That was the last I heard about it, though."

Saitou absently fingered the hilt of his sword, scowling. "Did this officer give you his name?" he asked Sano after a few minutes.

"Yeah, but I don't remember it exactly..." Sano ignored Saitou's contemptuous snort as he strained to recall the man who interviewed him after the first Akabeko incident. "It was something like Kiro... Shiro... damn, what was it?"

"Are you sure it was a police officer you talked to?" Saitou said. "It may have been an imposter. I imagine it would be difficult for you to tell the difference."

Sanosuke glared at Saitou. "The guy was wearing a Tokyo police uniform, and he showed me his identification papers. Looked pretty damn official to me," Sano spat. "And he said he worked for you. What else was I supposed to think?"

Saitou's eyes narrowed. "I think you'd better tell me everything you can remember about that night," he said, pulling another cigarette out of his pocket and glancing around. "But not here. Meet me at my office in an hour and we'll discuss this further."

Sanosuke nodded abruptly. "Is anyone taking care of Tae?" he asked sharply. "She should be at Oguni Clinic, not here on the floor."

"One of my men has medical training... he examined her as soon as she was found," Saitou said. "He says she's not in any immediate danger, but he feels certain she has at least a few broken ribs, and a possible broken arm. He recommended we not move her until the doctor arrived."

"That could take awhile... he's probably working on Tsubame-chan right now," Sanosuke said, turning to leave. "I'll go tell him to get over here as soon as he can."

"Fine. Just don't forget our appointment," Saitou said, striking a match against a countertop.

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It was almost dawn by the time Sanosuke emerged from Tokyo police headquarters. He'd never felt so exhausted... not just in body, but in mind as well. Saitou's questioning had been relentless, forcing Sano to recall details he hadn't even realized he'd observed that night three weeks ago. Not only had he remembered the full name of the officer who had taken his statement after the aborted robbery, he'd even been able to give Saitou a detailed physical description of the man who called himself Lt. Hiroshi Washuu. Saitou hadn't revealed his suspicions, but Sanosuke figured the guy was either an imposter... or worse, a cop taking bribes from whoever was responsible for the Akabeko robbery.

After identifying the lieutenant, Sanosuke thought that would be the end of it... but Saitou wasn't satisfied until the fighter had recounted every image, word and gesture he'd seen during the first attempted Akabeko robbery. Three times over. Despite his increasing urge to throttle the investigator, Sanosuke cooperated as best he could, well-aware of Saitou's value as an ally in this case. He hadn't missed the feral gleam in Saitou's eyes as he listened to Sanosuke's description of Lt. Hiroshi. Mibu's Wolf was on the hunt again... and Sanosuke knew from experience the Wolf would not stop until the prey was firmly clasped in his jaws. Which meant the bastards who'd hurt Tae and Tsubame would be caught that much faster.

Sanosuke cracked his knuckles, remembering his parting words with Saitou --

"Say nothing of our conversation to anyone," Saitou said as Sanosuke rose to leave. "And let me know immediately if you remember anything else."

"All right," Sanosuke said. "But I'd like a favor in return."

Saitou raised an eyebrow.

"I'd like to... assist... you in interviewing any suspects you find." Sanosuke flexed his fingers as he spoke. "Get my meaning?"

The officer sighed. "Yare, yare. Only a fool like you would be so obvious."

Sanosuke smothered yet another flare of temper, staring at Saitou coldly.

Saitou took a long drag of his cigarette. "Why not?" he finally replied.

"Good. I'll be in touch," Sanosuke said, waving casually as he walked away.

It was a long walk from headquarters to the rented room Sanosuke called home. He trudged wearily through the dark streets, shoulders hunched against the predawn chill. The night's events had left him badly shaken, a feeling he hadn't experienced since Yukishiro Enishi brought his Jinchuu to Tokyo years ago. The time since then had been so peaceful that Sano had almost forgotten what it was like to live with the constant threat of violence and loss hanging over himself and the people he cared about. It was like a heavy, choking cloud... smothering laughter... blotting out light.

Sanosuke rubbed his eyes vigorously, trying to snap out of his dark mood. After all, Tae and Tsubame were going to be okay -- Genzai-sensei had said as much when Sano had stopped by the clinic to let the doctor know he was needed at the Akabeko. Sano had briefly looked in on Tsubame-chan, who hadn't been able to rest comfortably until she knew Tae-san was safe. Sano had reassured the girl, who promptly fell asleep, a faint smile on her bruised face.

Her murmured thanks echoed in Sanosuke's head --

"Honto ni... arigatou gozaimasu... I knew we could count on you... Sanosuke-san..."

Sanosuke stopped walking, eyes shut tight, fists clenched. He punched a nearby wall, leaving a crater several feet across.

Gomen, Tae... Tsubame-chan... I failed you both this time... but I swear on my honor as a Sekihoutai... I'll find whoever did this and make them pay!

With a sharp nod of his head, Sanosuke began walking again... then pulled up short after a few steps. Instead of the rundown building where he lived, he stood before the back gate of Kamiya Doujou. In the midst of his brooding, he'd been completely unaware which direction he was headed in.

"Che," he swore softly, smiling ruefully. _Might as well go inside... it's almost breakfast-time anyway._

He leapt over the gate, landing as lightly as he could so as not to wake anyone. The sun was just beginning to rise, turning the eastern sky faintly pink... but wisps of early-morning mist still hovered over the ground. He wandered toward the well, thinking he should probably try to wash the blood out of his shirt. As he passed the vegetable garden, he was distracted by a shadowy figure kneeling

among the plants. A wave of warmth washed over him, momentarily submerging his depression.

Misao...

He could barely make out her features in the mist, but he caught sight of her raven-black braid trailing down her back. Her head was bowed, her eyes closed, her hands clasped in her lap. She was still in her sleeping robe, though she was wearing a haori over it to guard against the cold. She seemed completely unaware of his presence.

She must be meditating... or she definitely would've noticed me by now.

He smiled, remembering how he'd teased her about her morning ritual one day while they were shopping. "Meditating? You? That must take all of, what... five seconds? If you can even sit still for that long..."

She'd whacked him with the empty tofu tub. "Urusai," she huffed. "At least I try to enlighten myself... unlike some people I know."

Sano had winked at her then. "I prefer more... tangible... forms of enlightenment," he said, his low voice lingering over each word. He was rewarded with another smack from the now-blushing Misao, who nevertheless met his suggestive gaze head-on with a teasing grin.

"I don't think sake and dice qualify as tools for spiritual growth," she said playfully. "Unless you're donating your winnings to the local shrine..."

They'd both laughed heartily at that. Sano enjoyed Misao's quick wit immensely... almost as much as he enjoyed coaxing that bubbly laugh out of her with his own teasing. It was one of the reasons he flirted with her -- she almost always used laughter to cover her embarrassment. Not to mention the fact that she was adorable when she blushed...

Sano heard Misao emit a long sigh, followed by a shakily indrawn breath. He squinted, trying to get a better look at her face.

She sounds upset... almost as if she's --

The thinning fog revealed her profile, which confirmed his suspicions -- those were definitely tears on her cheek. His stomach twisted.

Oh, Misao... not again... tell me you're not crying over that jerk again... he doesn't deserve your tears, dammit!

As he listened to Misao's quiet sobs, Sanosuke longed to take her in his arms... wipe away her tears... make her smile again.

I just wish I could get her to talk about what happened... it's so unlike her, to hold anything inside. That's why it weighs so heavily on her heart...

Misao suddenly shifted, dropping her head into her hands and crouching over, her body shuddering.

That's it! I've seen enough suffering tonight... time to do something about it...

He entered the garden, bending down on one knee next to Misao. She sat up and whirled around to face him.

"S- Sano!" Her pale face flushed scarlet, and she hastily dragged her arm across her eyes. "I... I didn't hear you come in... what are you doing here? It's barely daybreak!"

He studied her silently for a minute. "Do you always cry when you meditate, Misao-chan?" he said softly, tracing the path of one tear with the tip of his finger. "I wasn't aware that was part of the ritual."

She pulled away from his hand, her blue-green eyes shimmering. "Don't," she pleaded brokenly.

"Don't what?" Sano dropped his hand, but his eyes remained fixed on hers. "Don't ask you what's wrong? Don't comfort you? Misao... I can't just sit here and watch you cry. Talk to me... let me help you..."

For a moment he thought she was about to relent. Her tears spilled over again, and her lips parted slightly as if she was about to say something. Then her eyes dropped to his blood-spattered gi. "Oh, Sano... you've been hurt!" she cried. "Are you still bleeding?"

She reached out to push aside the bloodied garment, but Sano nudged her hands away. "I'm okay. It's not my blood," he said wearily.

"Then whose...?"

Sanosuke looked away, unable to answer her. His throat felt strangely tight, his eyes hot. He kept hearing Tsubame's frightened cries, her pleas for him to help Tae. _And I couldn't do anything... not a damn thing..._

He was startled by Misao's light touch on his arm. "Sano?" she said tentatively, the sorrow on her face replaced by concern.

"It's Tsubame-chan's," he said thickly. "The Akabeko was robbed tonight... the thieves hurt Tsubame and Tae pretty badly. Tsubame-chan tried to get to me... so that I could help... but by the time I got to the restaurant, it was too late."

"How terrible!" Misao's tone was a mixture of horror and anger. "Will they be all right? Do the police know?"

"Genzai-sensei says they'll both be fine after a few days' rest. As for the police... we've got Saitou on our side for this one," Sano said, a half-smile briefly crossing his face. "You know how single-minded he is. Those scum-sucking thieves won't be free for long."

"Knowing Saitou, they won't be alive for long, either," Misao said, shuddering. "That guy doesn't know the meaning of mercy."

Rage flooded Sano's body. Without thinking, he jumped up, roaring, "Mercy? Those fucking bastards don't deserve to live another day! If you'd seen what they did to Tsubame-chan... to Tae..." He lashed out at the scarecrow Kenshin and the kids had made, sending its head flying across the yard with one punch. "Forget Saitou... if I get my hands on them, they'll wish he'd found them first!"

Misao watched silently as Sano vented his anger on the poor scarecrow. She remained on the ground, her hands gripping the folds of her sleeping robe. It had been a long time since she had seen Sano this enraged -- and it was a little scary. But she knew in her heart he would never turn on her, no matter how furious he was.

She also knew it was best to let him blow off steam, especially in this case. She and Sano were alike in many ways... they both were proud of their fighting skills and lived to use them for the benefit of the people they cared about. But even with all his power, he'd been unable to protect his friends last night. When she put herself in his place, she understood exactly how guilty and frustrated he must be feeling.

Sano stopped pummeling the remnants of the scarecrow, panting slightly. The unbridled fury glowing in his eyes had disappeared, leaving only sadness and fatigue behind. His shoulders slumped, and he dragged his sleeve clumsily across his face. "Chikusho," he growled hoarsely.

The storm having passed, Misao rose, brushing the soil off her knees. She walked up to Sano, gently touching his arm again. "It's not your fault, you know," she said. "You couldn't have known what was happening."

Sano turned to face her. Misao was shocked to see tears glistening in his brown eyes.

"That's not true," he said, his voice quivering. "I should've known something was up when I walked in on a bunch of thieves at the Akabeko the night before you first arrived in Tokyo..." He heard Saitou's voice echoing in his memory --

... say nothing of our conversation to anyone ...

-- but his need to share his pain with someone outweighed Saitou's command. Besides, he trusted Misao. She acted flighty sometimes, but Sano knew she was no empty-headed female. Being a member of the Oniwabanshuu, she knew when to keep her mouth shut, and she was fairly good at strategic thinking. She might be able to fit some pieces of this puzzle together in a way he hadn't yet considered.

It felt good to tell Misao everything that had happened. They left the garden and sat together on the porch outside the doujou practice room. She listened closely without interrupting, her grave eyes never leaving his face. Every now and then she would lay one of her hands over his when his emotions threatened to spin out of control again. The gesture both calmed and pleased him.

"... so, it really is my responsibility. If I'd only made sure the police followed up... I would've found out that lieutenant was lying to me. Then maybe none of this would've happened." Sano's mouth hardened in self-reproach. "Saitou's right -- I am a moron."

Misao snorted. "I never thought I'd live to see the day when you would admit defeat to that psycho cop," she said heatedly. "Should I start calling you 'ahou' now, too?"

The gibe had its intended effect. Sano stared at Misao... then began chuckling.

"Good one, Misao-chan," he said with a tired grin. "I get your point. I'll stop feeling sorry for myself now."

"Yoshi," Misao said brightly. "Now, I know something that'll make you feel better..."

Sano raised an eyebrow. "Oh really?" he said.

"Yup... a hot bath," she said, sliding off the porch. "Come on... I'll help you start the fire."

Sano couldn't let that one go. "Mmm... sounds like fun. So you'll be joining me, then?" he asked, lowering his voice suggestively. "Will you wash my back for me?"

Misao nailed him with a Kecho Geri to the gut. "Dame!" she growled. "But if you start being nice to me, I'll see what I can do about your gi."

"I thought I was being nice," Sano grumbled, rubbing his sore stomach. "Letting you know how much I enjoy your company and all..."

Misao couldn't help giggling. "Mou! You're impossible," she said in mock-frustration. "Now give me that shirt. And no smartass comments!" she thundered as Sano opened his mouth to tease her some more.

"Che. You're no fun," Sano pouted. He shrugged out of the gi and handed it to Misao. "Take good care of that," he said, sauntering off toward the bath house. Misao watched him walk away, smiling slightly.

Mmm... nice shoulders... wish he would go shirtless more often...

She shook herself. What was she thinking? She'd been hanging around Sano too long... his lascivious ways were rubbing off on her.

"Is everything all right, Misao-dono?"

Misao nearly jumped out of her skin. "Himura! You scared me to death!" she said reproachfully, turning to face Kenshin.

"Sumanu," he said. "I thought I heard Sano shouting awhile ago. Did something happen?"

Misao didn't even bother to try to avoid Kenshin's steady gaze. He was bound to find out about this sooner or later. Better he should find out from her... then he could help her tell Kaoru... and Yahiko. She took a deep breath.

"Yes," she said. "Something happened. Sit down and I'll tell you

everything..."

-- End of Chapter 4 --

5. These Changing Times

RK Fanfic: These Changing Times (Chapter 5) **Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic: These Changing Times**

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^_^;;

****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://www2.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****Chapter 5 -- Searching For Answers****

Kenshin sat silently next to the well as Misao scrubbed Sanosuke's stained gi. She'd just finished telling him what Sanosuke had told her, leaving nothing out. She knew Sano had told her to keep his meeting with Saitou to herself... but she knew Himura too well to even think she could conceal such important information from him. The former Hitokiri Battousai was every bit as good as Aoshi-sama at ferreting out a lie or catching an omission from a story. Besides, she knew how close Sano and Himura were... so Sano probably would've told him everything anyway, she reassured herself.

She looked up from the wash tub. Kenshin was frowning, his eyes narrowed... their usual placid violet now tinged with amber. She hadn't seen Himura look this angry since his final battle with Enishi... and she felt a stab of regret at having been the one to give him such upsetting news.

It isn't right... this is supposed to be the peaceful new age Himura fought so hard for all these years... his fighting days should be over. He should never have cause to look so hard and angry again...

"Misao-dono," Kenshin said quietly. "Where is Sano?"

"Right here, Kenshin," Sanosuke said. He walked up to them, swabbing his face with a towel. "You were right, Misao-chan... the bath really helped. How's my jacket?"

Misao held up the dripping garment. "I managed to get the worst out,"

she said, trying not to look directly at Sano. She was a little dismayed by how fascinating she found Sano's fresh-scrubbed, bare-chested appearance... and she wasn't about to embarrass herself by gawking at him in front of Himura.

"Arigatou," Sano said, taking the gi from Misao. As he began wringing it out, he addressed Kenshin--

"So... Misao-chan told you everything." It was a statement, not a question.

"Aa."

"I figured she would." Sano smiled briefly at Misao, who relaxed. She could tell from his casual tone that Sano wasn't angry with her. "You know... we have to tell Jou-chan and Yahiko." He grimaced. "They're both gonna freak... Yahiko, especially."

"I'm afraid so. I'll tell them, if you'd like."

"Iie. It's my responsibility," Sano said, a trace of bitterness in his voice.

Kenshin's gaze softened a bit. "Stop blaming yourself, Sano. You did all you could," he said gently.

"I keep telling him that, too," Misao said, shaking her finger at Sano. "Yamete, baka!"

Another brief smile crossed the tall man's face. "Gomen," he said, reaching down to pat Misao's head. "I promise that's the last time."

She smacked his hand away. "What do I look like, a dog?" she growled.

"Nah... more like a weasel," Sano teased. Kenshin sighed as Misao leveled Sano with a Kecho Geri.

"Go ahead... call me that again, you rooster-head!" Misao shouted, pinning Sanosuke to the ground with one knee against his chest. All the activity had loosened her sleeping robe... and as she leaned over Sano, he was treated to a great view of her unbound breasts.

Sano grinned wickedly. "As much as I've fantasized about something like this, Misao-chan," he drawled, "now's really not the time." That comment prompted a fresh rain of blows and curses from a beet-red Misao while Kenshin looked on, unable to keep himself from grinning right along with Sano.

"Oi, you guys are loud!"

Everyone froze as Yahiko stumbled around the corner, rubbing his eyes. "What the hell is going on out here?" the boy grouched.

Misao and Sano jumped up, looking at Kenshin. "Yahiko..." Kenshin said, his face sobering.

At Kenshin's solemn tone, Yahiko immediately became fully awake. "Nan dai?" he asked, his eyes wide with fear. "Tell me,

Kenshin."

Sanosuke moved in front of Yahiko, bending down and putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Yahiko," the fighter said, looking directly into his eyes. "There's been... an incident... at the Akabeko," he continued, cursing himself silently. "...incident"... I sound like that bastard Saitou..._

Yahiko paled, shrugging off Sano's hand. "Don't baby me, Sanosuke," he said, his voice trembling a little. "Just tell me what happened. Is... is Tsubame-chan..."

Sanosuke closed his eyes for a second, trying to shake the image of Tsubame-chan's battered, tear-streaked face. "She's okay now," he told Yahiko. "It was a robbery... she got pretty banged up, but Genzai-sensei says she'll be fine."

Yahiko swallowed. "And Tae-san?" he asked, his voice cracking a bit.

"Same thing... she's at the clinic with Tsubame-chan," Sanosuke replied, trying to sound reassuring.

Yahiko clenched his fists, turned away from the group and began running toward the back gate. "Matte, Yahiko -- where are you going?" Misao called to him.

"Where do you think, baka?" Yahiko called back to her. "To the clinic, of course."

In a flash, Sano caught up to Yahiko and grabbed him by the back of his sleeping robe. Yahiko began to protest, but Sano silenced him with a single wry observation --

"You might want to change first."

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The morning sun was burning off the predawn mist as Misao, Sanosuke and Yahiko quietly entered Oguni Clinic. They found Genzai-sensei dozing in a chair outside the partly open door to one of the hospital rooms. The old man stirred as the trio approached him.

"Ah... Yahiko-kun, Sanosuke-kun... I was expecting you, though not so early," Genzai-sensei said with a weary smile. "And Misao-chan, too! Demo... where are the Himuras? Still asleep?"

"Kaoru-san is," Misao said. "Kenshin said they'll come as soon as she's up and Kintou is fed." Surprisingly, Kenshin hadn't needed much persuading to stay home with his family. Misao was determined to keep him out of this whole business... for Kaoru-san's sake and their children.

"That's good," Genzai-sensei said, slowly rising from his chair. "Kaoru-chan needs all the rest she can get. Speaking of which... I know you're here to see Tae-san and Tsubame-chan, but it's best if we don't disturb them right now. It was a very long night..."

Sanosuke studied the doctor's pale face and tired eyes. "For all of you," he finished, eliciting a chuckle from

Genzai-sensei.

"Daijoubu, daijoubu," the old doctor said, waving his hand dismissively. "That's the life of a doctor... sometimes we don't get much sleep."

"How are they?" Yahiko asked, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

"Eh? Oh, they'll be fine," Genzai-sensei said. Although his smile was reassuring, Sano could see a hint of worry in the old man's eyes. "I've patched up the worst of their bumps and bruises... all they need now is some rest. If you come back after lunch --"

"Can I..." Yahiko's voice trailed off for a moment. He looked up at Genzai-sensei imploringly. "Can I just look in on Tsubame-chan? Just for a minute? I promise I'll be quiet."

The doctor glanced at Sano, who nodded slightly. "All right, Yahiko-kun... but remember, try not to wake her or get her excited. Calm and rest are the best medicine for her right now."

Yahiko nodded solemnly, slipping through the half-open door. Sano waited a moment, then soundlessly slipped the door shut. He turned to Genzai-sensei. "All right, sensei... now you can speak freely. Are they really okay?" the younger man asked in a low voice.

The doctor sighed, shaking his head. "I was telling the truth... they'll heal all right," he said. "But it was a nasty business. I can't believe anyone would treat two defenseless women so cruelly." He rubbed his eyes. "I didn't want to say so in front of Yahiko-kun, but I was worried for a bit about the little one. Luckily, that wound in her back wasn't as nasty as it first appeared... it stitched up nicely."

"So they're really going to be fine?" Misao asked anxiously, glancing at Sanosuke's grim face.

"Hai... but they won't be working for awhile," Genzai-sensei said. "I want to keep them here at least a week to be certain they're healing properly. Sanosuke-kun, have you told Tae-san's father what's going on?"

"The police told me they'd notify him," Sanosuke replied, his voice cooling a bit. "I'd rather it come from someone else, but I don't really know Tae's father that well... so it made more sense to do it their way."

"So the police are involved," Genzai-sensei said. "Yokatta ne! It's about time they did something about all these robberies. Why, this was the third violent theft this week!"

Both Sano and Misao jumped slightly in surprise. "You mean... there have been more robberies like this one recently?" Misao gasped. "Why haven't the papers said anything about it?"

Sano was grinding his teeth in silent fury. _To hell with the papers... why did that fucking jerk Saitou leave that bit of news out of our conversation? Pumping me for information... while all the time he knew this was going on... the bastard used me again!_

He clenched his fists, trying to concentrate on what Genzai-sensei was saying. There would be time enough later to deal with Saitou and his manipulations.

"I'm not sure why news hasn't gotten out," the doctor said. "But there are rumors that these robberies are being coordinated by a new yakuza mob. That might be the reason people aren't talking about it... these yakuza could be offering bribes... or making threats... or both, to keep people quiet."

"But for them to have suppressed word of this many crimes... to this extent... they must be extraordinarily well-organized," Misao mused. "And their leader must be unusually sharp. Most yakuza we dealt with in Kyoto were run by stupid, greedy, petty men... their lack of foresight and strategic ability usually ended up doing more damage to their organizations than the Oniwabanshuu ever could."

Sanosuke stared at Misao as she stroked her chin thoughtfully. "I guess you have been busy these past two years," he said admiringly. "You'll have to tell me about your adventures sometime."

Still deep in thought, Misao looked up at Sano in confusion. "Nani?" she said.

"Never mind... it's just strange to hear you talking like your okashira," Sano said, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Instead of getting angry, as Sano suspected she might, Misao smiled a little sheepishly. "Gomen... didn't mean to sound like a know-it-all," she said.

"Not at all... what you said makes sense," Sanosuke said. "And if there's a yakuza organization that well-constructed in Tokyo, you can bet it wasn't built overnight. I think if we do some digging, we'll uncover at least a few of its roots. Then we can follow them to the source."

Misao's eyes danced with excitement. "It's been awhile since I've done any investigating," she said. "But I'm ready when you are."

"So am I."

A startled Sanosuke turned to discover Yahiko standing just outside the doorway where Genzai-sensei had been only a moment before. He slid the door part way shut, then turned to face Sano and Misao. "I'm coming, too," he said firmly, his dark eyes blazing. "Don't even try to tell me I can't. I want those bastards. I'll see to it personally that they pay for what they did to Tsubame-chan... and that they don't hurt anyone else like that ever again."

His quiet, resolute tone was so like Kenshin's that Misao had to smile. She looked at Sanosuke, shrugging slightly. "I would think we can use all the help we can get," she said. "Ne, Sano?"

Sanosuke smiled broadly, clapping Yahiko on the shoulder. "Fine by me," he said as Yahiko struggled to regain his balance. "You've proven yourself in enough fights before this. But you probably should keep quiet about it... Jou-chan'll have all our heads if she finds out you're involved."

Yahiko grinned. "Yoshi. So, what do we do first?"

"How about your policeman friend Shinichi? He might be able to give us some information on the police investigation into these robberies," Sanosuke said.

"Good idea... Shinichi's always saying if I ever need anything, just say the word," Yahiko said.

"Why don't you go talk to him after breakfast?" Sanosuke said, his eyes narrowing. "And listen... don't let Saitou see you... and make sure Shinichi doesn't say anything to him, either. I don't want that yarou getting involved." _Any more that he already is, anyway..._

"Wakatta," Yahiko said, a little doubtfully. "Demo... Saitou is a high-ranking officer, and he has connections all over Tokyo. I don't know if I'll be able to avoid him for long."

"Don't worry about it," Misao said, giving Sanosuke a sharp look. "Just do your best... I'm sure that'll be good enough. Why don't you head home? I'm sure Kenshin has breakfast ready by now."

Yahiko stared witheringly at Misao. "You must think I'm a total idiot," he said. "No way I'm letting you guys ditch me now!"

Sanosuke playfully whacked Yahiko in the back of the head. "Calm down, Yahiko-chan... we're not going anywhere," he said, chuckling. "We'll be right behind you... we just want to finish our chat with Genzai-sensei first."

Yahiko glared daggers at Sano. "All right, I'm going," he grumbled. "But you better tell me everything you find out. And stop calling me -chan, you chicken-headed jerk!" He stomped out of the clinic, muttering, "...not a kid, dammit!"

Misao and Sano grinned at each other, then turned to the doctor. "Is there anything else we can do to help you, Genzai-sensei?" Misao said. "You look like you could use a break. Isn't there another doctor who could relieve you?"

"I'm afraid not," Genzai-sensei sighed, sinking back into the chair. "Ever since Megumi-san left, it's been tough to find a partner willing to stick with a clinic that treats everyone, regardless of whether they can pay for it. I've done all right on my own, but I'm an old man, and these past few months have been exhausting. This crime wave is giving me too many patients... I've barely slept more than a few hours a night these past couple of weeks." He nodded decisively. "That's why I've made my decision -- I'm retiring by the end of this year."

"Retiring?" Sanosuke sputtered. "But... but with you gone, what'll happen to Oguni Clinic?"

"Go-shinpai naku," the old man said, smiling brightly. "I've already received a letter from Megumi-san -- she's coming back to Tokyo with a doctor who is considering taking over the clinic for me."

"That's wonderful!" Misao said, clapping her hands together. "I'm sure Himura and Kaoru-san will be happy to see her again... do you know this doctor she's bringing with her?"

Genzai-sensei shook his head. "I think it's one of the students who attends the medical school Megumi-san and her brother established in Aizu," he said. "I was hoping Megumi-san might consider staying on as well... but the school is very successful... and with her brother there as well, I wouldn't blame her for wanting to stay in Aizu."

Misao glanced at Sanosuke, who hadn't said a word since Genzai-sensei first mentioned Megumi's return. His face was grave, his eyes dark with some emotion Misao couldn't quite identify. It could be sadness or... regret?

... I always wondered about those two... whether they were ever... involved. Thinking about the possibility made Misao's stomach feel heavy and strange. _Sano certainly doesn't seem happy about her coming back... so if they were... it probably ended badly. Or maybe she rejected him... I certainly know how that feels..._

Sanosuke finally spoke. "When are you expecting the kitsune-sensei and her student to arrive?" he said in his normal, breezy way.

"In three days," Genzai-sensei replied. "Unless they get delayed by some medical emergency on the road... that happens a lot, especially in the country, where there aren't many doctors. I'm sure she'll stop by the doujou for a visit when she arrives."

"I'm sure she will," Sanosuke said sardonically. Then, more cheerfully-- "We'd better be going, sensei. Take care of those two... we'll come by to visit them later."

"You can count on me," the doctor said good-naturedly. "Mata ne, Sanosuke-kun, Misao-chan. And be careful... I don't want to be treating either of you anytime soon!"

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"Misao-chan!" Unmei tapped her cane impatiently. "You aren't paying attention. That blow couldn't tear paper, much less stun an enemy."

Misao wiped sweat out of her eyes. "Gomen, sensei. My arms have never been my strength," she panted, holding up her slim, aching limbs.

"Ridiculous!" Unmei snorted. "In my prime, I could defeat men three times my size with one punch... and as you can see, I'm much smaller than you." The old teacher's eyes glittered. "Remember... the power is in the technique -- thus, concentration equals power. Don't think about your limitations... your lack of physical strength... just focus on doing the technique exactly as I showed you and you will succeed. Now... again!"

"Hai, sensei!" Misao turned to the practice dummy again, breathing hard. She was tired and dripping sweat, but she took a deep breath, closed her eyes and silently repeated Unmei's advice--

Concentration equals power... belief equals strength...

"Hyaaaa!" Misao roared, her fist slicing the air. It connected with the dummy's head in exactly the right vital point, splitting its burlap cover while leaving the straw within intact.

"Excellent! Magnificent!" Unmei clapped her hands. "Well done, my child. You may take a break now."

Misao walked over to the water bucket, beaming with pride. Under Unmei's tutelage, her kempo had improved dramatically in a few short weeks... and the old woman had promised that once Misao was able to defeat the doujou's champion, she would begin kodachi training. That promise fueled her to succeed in a way nothing else ever had before.

"Misao-chan?" Unmei hobbled over to where Misao was sitting. "You seem distracted today. Is something troubling you?"

Misao set down the dipper she was drinking from. She didn't want to say too much about the previous night's events, but if there was a possibility Unmei could help them... "Hai, sensei," she said. "Some friends of mine were hurt in a robbery last night. I guess I'm still upset about it."

"Ahh..." Unmei said, her black eyes narrowing. "Even in these peaceful times, violence continues to rear its ugly head. I'm so sorry to hear about your friends... will they be all right?"

"Hai. I just wish we could catch whoever did it," Misao said. "Unmei-sensei... do you think you could use your onmitsu to track down whoever is organizing these robberies? I heard this isn't the first time this has happened around here lately."

Unmei studied Misao for a moment. "We can certainly try," she said, patting Misao's knee. "Try not to worry, child. I'll see what our information network can turn up for you... if you promise to forget about this unfortunate situation for the rest of your lesson."

Misao grinned at the old woman. "It's a deal," she said, leaping up from the bench and trotting back toward the practice ring. As Misao continued practicing her punch, Toushi entered the yard and walked up to Unmei.

"Doushita, obaa-san?" Toushi said. "I saw you raise your cane... is there something you need from me?"

"Aa," Unmei said, her eyes fixed on Misao. "My young student has asked us for help in locating some rather vicious thieves. They're becoming the talk of the town, apparently. You know what to do, don't you?"

Toushi bowed slightly. "Wakatta," he said flatly. "I'll begin immediately."

"You had better. I'll expect a full report tomorrow," Unmei said, a hint of venom coloring her words.

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"I can't believe Megumi-san is coming back!" Kaoru said as she scooped up another helping of rice. "It's so exciting to have our old friends returning to Tokyo, isn't it, anata?"

Kenshin smiled at Kaoru's bright-eyed expression. "Aa," he said, taking another piece of fish off the grill. "I look forward to meeting her colleague as well. Especially if he's going to be replacing Genzai-sensei before our children are born."

Kaoru patted Kenshin's free hand. "Remember -- Genzai-sensei said that even if I'm late and he retires before the babies come, he'll be the one to deliver them. He promised me."

"I wouldn't worry," Yahiko said around a mouthful of fish. He swallowed and continued, "If this new guy is even half as good as Megumi-san, you'll be in good hands."

"True," Kaoru said, giving Kintou a bit of rice, which he swallowed eagerly. "But since Genzai-sensei has been with me since the start of my pregnancy... I'd feel better if he saw it through to the end."

Misao finished her own food silently. She'd been stealing looks at Sano all evening, but he had yet to meet her eyes. He'd been uncharacteristically subdued for most of the day... though he appeared to be back to his normal, gregarious self when she met up with him after her training session with Unmei. But as the conversation over dinner turned to Megumi's impending arrival, he'd clammed up again, chewing on a fish bone and staring into space.

As the others continued chattering, Kenshin rose from his seat by the grill and approached his friend. "Sano? Daijoubu de gozaru ka?" Kenshin asked in a low voice, crouching down beside him.

Sano turned to Kenshin with a puzzled look. "Hm? I'm fine, Kenshin," he said lightly. "Just not in the mood to chat. Know what I mean?"

"Aa," the redhead replied with a small, knowing smile. "It's been a rough day for you, hasn't it?"

Sano closed his eyes. "Yup... that about says it," he smirked. "Now stop fussing over me... you should save that for Jou-chan."

Misao turned toward the pair. "I agree, Himura," she said, pushing aside her empty dishes. "Now scoot! I'll take it from here."

Kenshin held up his hands. "Wakatte de gozaru," he chuckled. "I'm leaving now. Don't worry about the dishes, Misao-dono... Yahiko and I can take care of them."

"Nani?" Yahiko spluttered, jumping up. "Chotto! I'm staying with them..."

"I don't think so," Kenshin said brightly, taking Yahiko by the shoulders and marching him toward the kitchen. "We'll see you later. Take care!"

After Yahiko's protests faded away, and Kaoru and Kintou bid them

good night, Sano regarded Misao with interest. "So... what do you have in store for me tonight, Misao-chan?" he said, his good humor fully restored.

Misao scrambled to her feet. "I thought this would be a good night to start our search," she said with a sly grin. "That is... if you're up for it."

Sano slowly rose to his feet, returning Misao's impish expression with his own roguish grin. "Bring it on," he said, his eyes gleaming with anticipation.

-- End of Chapter 5 --

6. These Changing Times

RK Fanfic: These Changing Times (Chapter 6)

****Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic: These Changing Times****

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^_^;;

****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://www2.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****Chapter 6 -- Midnight Ramblings****

"I can't believe it!" Sanosuke smacked a nearby wall in frustration. "We've been asking around for hours, and no one saw a damn thing last night." He began mimicking the polite, concerned tone affected by most of the shopkeepers and residents he and Misao had interviewed. "'Nothing unusual.' 'Oh, no, I didn't see or here anything.' 'No, everything was normal last night.' Either they're all lying... or they're too frightened to tell us what they really saw. Stupid cowards." He wearily rested his forehead against the wall.

Misao leaned back against the wall next to Sano. "It's possible they are telling the truth," she said. "We're already pretty sure we're not dealing with your normal variety of yakuza. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd managed to thoroughly conceal their presence at the Akabeko last night."

Sano turned to face the young onmitsu. She was staring ahead at nothing in particular, wearing that same thoughtful, focused

expression he'd seen at the clinic that morning when they were discussing the robberies. The air around her fairly crackled with the force of her concentration. Sano smiled affectionately, his eyes softening.

... if her fellow Oniwabanshuu could only see her now...

His frustration dissolved as he watched her ponder the events of the evening. She was still leaning against the wall, one leg cocked, its foot pressed against the stone surface. She frowned, crossing her arms just below her breasts. She bounced her foot against the wall once... twice.

Then, in typical Misao fashion... she lost her patience.

"Mou!" she wailed, shoving herself away from the wall and stomping around in a circle. "I can't figure it out! If no one will talk to us about this, what are we supposed to do next? Wander around Tokyo hoping we'll run into the thieves? I mean, we have nothing to go on... not even the vaguest clue!"

"You're right," Sano responded, stifling a grin at her more characteristic outburst. He walked up to Misao, laying his hand on her shoulder. "I think we've done all we can tonight. Maybe we should wait until Shinichi gets back to Yahiko... or Tae and Tsubame-chan are well enough to tell us what happened. I'm sure tomorrow we can talk to them... they must have seen or heard at least one thing we can check out."

"What if Saitou gets to them first?" Misao grumbled. "I was really hoping to get the jump on him this time."

"We still might. He's so obsessed with finding that police leak that it may leave us an opening," Sano said. He squeezed her shoulder. "In the meantime, there's only one thing left for us to do..."

Misao looked up at him in puzzlement.

"Celebrate the start of our partnership," Sano said, his brown eyes twinkling. "Come on... I'll buy you a drink in honor of our first investigation together."

Misao knew she should go back to the doujou and to bed. She could almost hear Okon and Omasu scolding her --

... going out drinking alone with him... and in your fighting clothes! Misao-chan, it's just not ladylike...

Silently ordering her "conscience" to shut up, she pressed her lips together and shook her head, averting her eyes.

Sano's smile faded. _Che. She's backing off again... just when I thought we were getting somewhere..._

"... call that an invitation?"

Sano stared at her in astonishment. "Oro?"

Misao nearly burst out laughing at his Himura-like expression of confusion. "You're holding out on me," she sniffed, folding her arms.

"I know you still have that sake from the Aoiya... and all you offer me is one measly drink of some cheap swill." She yawned dramatically. "How boring..."

Completely flummoxed, Sano said the first thing that came into his head --

"How the hell did you know I hadn't drunk that sake yet?" He knew it was a stupid question, but her response caught him off guard. _She's good at that... keeping me guessing... the little weasel!_

Misao reached up and tapped him on the nose. "Trade secret," she grinned. "So... you gonna cough up the good stuff, or am I going home?"

"You win," he said, laughing and throwing up his hands. "Where are we drinking? My place?"

"Nope. I have a much better idea," Misao said cheerfully as she started down the street, pulling Sano along with her.

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"All right! Name your roll and place your bets!"

A chorus of different numbers rang out from all around the packed gambling hall.

"Double-six!"

"Four and five!"

The man taking bets glanced over at Sanosuke and Misao. "Your wager?" he said, his eyes roving over Misao in her skimpy ninja gear.

Misao sat up straight, her expression comically solemn. "Snake eyes!" she announced, holding up two of her kunai for emphasis.

The men surrounding them laughed heartily. "Oi, Misao-chan... you'd better put those away before you hurt someone," one of them said with a broad grin.

"Daijoubu, daijoubu," Misao said, her words slurring a bit as she waved the hand holding the kunai. The men sitting across from her backed away. "I'm a well-trained 'mitsu... no need to fear. Ne, Sano?"

"Sou, sou," Sanosuke agreed, draining his sake cup. "Very well-trained. Misao-chan, how much'r we bettin' this time?"

Misao set her kunai down, much to the relief of the other patrons. "Hmm... how about 100 yen?" she said, stroking her chin.

Everyone around her face-faulted.

"B- but... that's too much! No one here can cover that... if you win again, you'll break the bank!" the bet-taker protested.

Misao glanced at Sano. "Ne... what d'you think, Sano? Should we let

'em off the hook?" she asked, holding out her empty sake cup.

"Ahh... what the hell," he replied, tipping the sake jug sharply until Misao's cup was filled, then re-filling his own. "We're almost out of sake anyway. This'll be our last bet..."

"Wakatta," Misao said, slapping down a handful of coins. "Twenty yen! You losers should be able to cover that, right?"

"Hai, hai," the moderator grumbled. "All bets are closed! Winner throws." He handed the dice to Misao, leaning over a bit as he did so. Sano tightened his grip on his sake cup.

Trying to look down her shirt, eh, yarou? Better back off... or I'll kick your ass!

Misao hesitated, turning to her companion. "Sano?" she said with a radiant, slightly lopsided smile, holding the dice out to him.

Her action elicited several envious sighs from the other gamblers. Puffed with pride, Sanosuke returned Misao's smile and patted her hand.

"I appreciate the gesture... but let's not mess with success," he said, winking at her. "Gambatte yo, Misao-chan!"

"All right! Here I go!" Misao gulped the last of her sake and set the cup down forcefully. Wiping her mouth with the back of her free hand, she leaned forward and threw the dice into the middle of the ring formed by the gamblers. They rolled to a stop, each showing a single black dot. The hall erupted with cheers and shouts.

"Yatta!" Misao shrieked, throwing her arms around Sano. "That's our tenth straight win! We're rich!"

Sanosuke returned her embrace self-consciously. Even in his drunken state, he was aware of the many eyes upon them. "Omedetou," he said, unable to resist the urge to give her slender waist an extra squeeze before releasing her. "It was all thanks to your luck... so the money's really yours."

"Dame, dame, dame!" Misao shook her head vigorously. "You shared your sake with me... so I'm sharing my winnings with you."

Sano rubbed the back of his neck, feeling slightly sheepish. "Iie, Misao-chan... it's not really the same --"

Misao cut him off by pressing a finger gently against his slightly open mouth. "It's decided," she said in a low voice, slowly running her fingertip down the center of Sano's lips and letting it rest briefly against his chin. "So stop arguing and take it, 'kay?"

Her flirtatious touch sent pleasant little shivers through him. "I give up," he murmured, knowing the sake was probably responsible for her provocative behavior... but basking in her attention all the same.

Then Misao stood up, wobbling a bit. "Oi... I'm ready to collect, so hand it over, mister!" she said loudly, pointing at the bet-taker. He

rolled his eyes and handed Misao a sack filled with coins and bills.

"One-hundred fifty yen. You can count it, if you want."

"Nah... I trust you guys," Sanosuke said, taking the heavy sack from Misao. "It's nice to be on the winning end for a change. Ja!"

Several protests rose from the crowd as the pair headed for the door.

"Oi, Misao-chan... don't leave yet!"

"Misao-chan... roll once for me!"

Misao turned with an apologetic smile. "Gomen, minna... my agent here says it's time to quit," she said, glancing mischievously at Sano. "I'll come back some other time and play with you guys, ne?" She flashed a dazzling smile and blew kisses at the gamblers, who laughed and roared their approval.

Sanosuke tugged on her braid. "I hate to drag you away from your adoring public..." he teased.

"All right... we're going... ja!" Misao called as she followed Sano out the door.

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The shadowy figure waited patiently outside the clinic window, watching as the old doctor looked in on his sleeping patient. The woman was sleeping soundly, though her breath appeared to catch occasionally... likely from the pain of her broken ribs. The doctor nodded with satisfaction and slid the door shut behind him.

The watcher glanced around quickly to make sure the guards the police had sent were still out front with the old man. An instant later, he opened the window and slipped through, approaching the room's occupant on silent feet. She didn't stir as he stood at her bedside and stared down at her, studying her black eye and swollen lip. He frowned behind his mask, remembering her defiant eyes... her fierce refusal to give him what he demanded the night before...

Her spirit should be broken by now... like the others... but I have to be sure...

He pushed a tendril of her long brown hair behind her ear, leaned down and whispered --

"Wake up... Sekihara Tae."

Tae murmured something unintelligible, turning away from him in apparent protest. He stroked her hair again, repeating his command, his lips accidentally brushing her ear.

Her good eye fluttered open, then widened in shock. Before she could draw breath to scream, he clamped a gloved hand tightly over her mouth.

"Don't worry, Sekihara-san... I'm just here to deliver a message." He smiled coldly as he felt her tremble. _She's terrified. That's good._ "Next time we visit you... we expect you to cooperate fully. If you give us trouble again, the young girl pays the price. Do you understand?"

She nodded, tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

"Oh, and one more thing... it would be in your best interest to tell the police you don't remember anything about last night. That blow to the head must have made you forget. Tell your nosy friends the same thing."

She shook her head violently, her expression as clear as words. _They won't believe me..._

His eyes blazed, and he tightened his grip over her mouth until she moaned in pain. "They had better believe you," he hissed, "or you'll answer to me. Now, if you want to be left alone... you'll keep quiet until I'm gone. All right?"

She nodded again, a few tears trickling down her cheeks. He released her and silently crept to the window, peering over the sill. A guard now stood in the alley, but he was a good distance away from the window. The intruder easily swung himself out the window and onto the clinic roof, making no more noise than a cat. He crouched for a minute as the guard glanced curiously down the alley. The moment the guard turned away again, he leapt onto the roof of the next building and disappeared into the shadows...

Back in the clinic, Tae lay alone in her bed, still shaking with terror. _Oh, father... Tsubame-chan... what am I going to do? If the police can't protect us, then..._

For a brief, hopeful moment, she thought of Sanosuke and Kenshin. But when that evil man had warned her against talking to her friends, she was certain he meant the spiky-haired fighter and the diminutive swordsman. Besides, Kenshin had Kaoru and their growing family to consider now... those monsters would most certainly target them all if she brought Kenshin into this. That left Sanosuke... and even with his great strength and formidable fighting skills, Tae doubted he could handle this by himself.

Despite the pain from her ribs, she rolled over, burying her face in her pillow to muffle her renewed sobs.

It's best if I do as they say... for everyone's sake...

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"I can't believe how well we did tonight!" Misao chortled gleefully, weaving slightly as she skipped beside Sanosuke, who was whistling a cheerful melody. "D'you know how much we can buy with all that money?" She rubbed her hands together greedily. "I can hardly wait to go to market tomorrow! We should have a feast... maybe with Tae-san and Tsubame-chan, if they're well enough... to cheer them up... ne, Sano?"

Sano stopped whistling. "That's a pretty good idea," he said. "Let's

ask Genzai-sensei if it's okay first... then I'll help you shop."

"Yoshi!" Misao bounced with excitement. She then drew herself up as straight and tall as she could, intoning, "Of course... it doesn't mean everything is solved... we still have a job to do... ne, Sano?"

He grinned and nodded in reply.

Misao suddenly looked stricken. "Maybe we shouldn't be partying... maybe we should be more serious until the criminals are caught... maybe we'll offend people if we're having fun... ne, Sano?"

The ninja girl now looked to be on the verge of tears. Sanosuke sighed, scratching the back of his head. _Shouldn't have let her drink so much... talk about mood swings..._

"Daijoubu, Misao-chan," he said, tapping her under the chin. "We have to keep our spirits up, right? I don't think anyone can blame us for that."

Misao's eyes brightened. "Sou desu ne," she said, her cheerful energy restored. She smiled up at him. "You always say just the right thing," she said, cocking her head. "It's like you know me better 'n anybody..."

Before Sano fully grasped her last comment, she was off again, bounding down the street. "C'mon, slowpoke... race you to the corner!" she yelled over her shoulder.

"No fair... you had a head start!" Sano protested as he sprinted after her.

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He was about to drop to the street when he saw two figures headed his way. A girl was running down the street, so fast her long braid stretched out nearly straight behind her. It whipped around when she turned her head to shout taunts at her pursuer, a tall man with spiky brown hair carrying a medium-sized sack over his shoulder. Despite his load, the tall man was gaining on the laughing girl. As they drew closer to the building upon which he crouched, he could hear their breathless banter --

"... give it up... rooster-head! Told'ya I could... out-run you... in my battle... gear..."

"... not over yet... you little... weasel!"

With an extra burst of speed, the man overtook the young woman. "Caught you!" the man crowed victoriously as they both slid to a halt directly beneath the observer's rooftop perch. He flattened himself against the tiles, silently cursing their timing.

Panting, the girl conceded, "... a tie... not bad... must be those long legs of yours."

The man grinned down at his companion, who had bent over to catch her breath. "So... what do I win?" he said.

She looked up at him. "Nothing... it was a tie... remember?"

"So we should both get something, then," he said, gazing down her. "I know what I want..."

She straightened, blushing at his provocative tone. "I'll just bet you do," she began, then stopped abruptly.

The watcher's stomach lurched as he realized the girl was staring directly at his hiding place on the roof...

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Misao squinted up at the roof of the low building next to where she and Sano were standing. She responded to Sano's puzzled stare by putting a finger to her lips.

I may be drunk... but I still know when I'm being watched... just wish I could see a little clearer.

She backed up several paces, then took a flying leap toward the rooftop...

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As the girl soared through the air toward him, he could tell she would easily make the jump... thereby discovering him. He could not allow that to happen.

Frantically, he slid his hands over and around the tiles in front of him. Relief flooded his body as he found what he was seeking...

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"Misao-chan, what the hell...?" Sanosuke sputtered as he watched her leap into the air, straining her body toward the edge of the roof. She smiled triumphantly as her left foot met its tiled surface...

... then gasped as it skidded across the small stones and debris lying there...

The hidden man smirked as he watched her fall.

.....

"Misao!"

As Misao toppled off the roof, Sanosuke raced toward her, his arms outstretched. He caught her, but the momentum of her fall knocked them both to the ground.

"Ouch!" he grimaced, gently rolling her off him and sitting up. "Didn't anyone ever tell you not to go jumping on buildings when you're drunk? Wha'cha do that for?"

Misao didn't respond. She lay motionless on her side, her eyes

closed. Sanosuke felt as if a cold hand had closed around his heart.

Gods, no... she can't be...

He rolled her on her back and gently patted her face. "C'mon, Misao... snap out of it," he whispered urgently. "Come on, babe... answer me..."

She groaned, turning away from him. "Go 'way," she mumbled. "Feel terrible... need to rest..."

Sanosuke let out a long, relieved sigh. "I think it's about time we call it a night," he said.

"Hai," Misao said, her eyes still closed. "Oyasumi..."

Sano chuckled, shaking his head. "Oi, baka... you can't sleep here," he said, grabbing her by the shoulders and sitting her up. "And I can't carry you and the money at the same time. Can you walk?"

Misao gave him a bleary smile. "Think so," she said thickly. "Help me up..."

He stood up, pulling her with him. The minute she put her weight on her left leg, she yelped.

"Chikusho... must've twisted it..." she muttered darkly as she leaned against Sano. "Stupid, stupid..."

Sano stroked her hair soothingly. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I have an idea." He leaned over and picked up the money sack, handing it to Misao. "Can you hold that all right?"

She nodded, wrapping her arms around the sack. Sanosuke then scooped her up and began walking toward Kamiya Doujou. Neither of them noticed the soft thud of someone landing on the ground behind them, or the sound of light footsteps as the shadowy figure headed in the opposite direction...

.....

"Sano... can you put me down for a minute?"

The world was spinning around Misao, making her feel weak and trembly. She felt Sanosuke slowly lower her to the ground and take the sack from her.

"Are you feeling sick, Misao-chan?" His concerned expression was touching.

"Yeah..." she replied, smiling wanly. "Not only do I feel sick... I feel like an idiot."

Sanosuke gave her that sly half-smile of his. "So you drank too much... it happens. Next time we'll both know better..."

She nodded, taking slow, deep breaths. Now that the heavy sack wasn't pressing into her gut, she felt a lot better. "Sano, is there any way you can handle that bag? It's really hard for me to hold it."

He considered it for a moment. "I can do it... if you'll lend me your sash," he said.

Under normal circumstances, Misao would have smacked him silly for making such a suggestion. But at the moment, she couldn't care less how improper it was. Without a word, she untied the sash and handed it to him. She held her sleeveless top shut and watched as Sano tied the ends of her sash around the top of the sack, making a large loop. He then hoisted the loop diagonally over one shoulder, allowing the bag to hang at his side.

"Nicely done," she said as he picked her up again. "I never knew you were so inventive."

He opened his mouth to make a teasing reply. Their eyes locked.

Everything stopped.

Sanosuke almost forgot to breathe as he silently... longingly... stared at Misao. Her blue-green eyes were warm with affection... her cheeks flushed from the sake... her lips curved into a slight smile.

It was the perfect opportunity.

Misao contentedly gazed up at Sano. He'd been so kind to her... she had to think of some way to thank him for it. Maybe she should treat him to lunch or something...

While she was mulling this over, she idly wondered why he was no longer smiling at her. She finally got a clue when he began lowering his head toward hers. Her heart nearly jumped out of her chest.

He's... he's going to...

Before her sake-fogged brain had a chance to finish the thought, he was kissing her.

Sano knew this was probably Misao's first kiss... and he didn't want to frighten or repulse her. So he kept it clean -- closed mouth, light pressure. It had been a long time since he'd experienced such chaste contact -- yet it aroused him far more quickly than his encounters with more practiced women ever had. It took every ounce of control he possessed to keep the kiss simple.

For a brief, panicked instant, Misao considered pushing Sano away... but the urge was quickly obliterated by the sensations that surged through her in response to his kiss... comfort... need... hunger... power. She could hardly think... didn't want to... all that mattered was this moment, these feelings. She raised her head slightly, pressing her lips more firmly against his, clutching his jacket with one trembling hand.

Her innocent response nearly shattered his restraint. They had to stop... now... before he couldn't. He pulled away slowly, brushing her lips once more before withdrawing completely. He opened his eyes.

Misao was still gazing up at him... eyes wide, mouth slightly open, breathing heavily. The slight flush on her cheeks had deepened to scarlet. Her right hand remained fisted in his jacket, while the left clutched her own shirt closed. He couldn't help smirking a bit.

_Well... I'll let you ponder __that__ for awhile, my little weasel..._

"It's time we got you home," he said in a deep, slightly husky voice. As he began walking again, Misao rested her head against his chest, lulled by the warmth of his body and the steady thump of his heart.

By the time Sano reached the doujou, she was fast asleep.

-- End of Chapter 6 --

7. These Changing Times

RK Fanfic: These Changing Times (Chapter 7)

****Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic: These Changing Times****

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://www2.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****Chapter 7 -- The Morning After****

Misao woke to the sun shining through the paper panels in her bedroom door. She sat straight up in alarm. _Oh no! I slept straight through breakfast!_

With that thought, she scrambled off her futon... only to collapse back upon it a moment later, her head pounding viciously.

Ohhhh no... terrible hangover... hurts to move. Guess I'll be staying here for now...

She rested her arm across her eyes, vaguely remembering the large amount of sake she'd drunk the night before. She strained to recall

the rest of the evening's events.

Let's see... went to the gambling hall... drank with Sano... won a lot of cash... was racing Sano home...

Her left ankle was throbbing. She reached down and touched it lightly, wincing. _Still a little swollen... did that happen while I was running? No... it was after that, when I thought I saw someone watching us..._

With no small amount of embarrassment, she remembered tumbling off the roof... Sanosuke having to carry her... and then --

... the kiss!

Forgetting her headache, Misao sat bolt upright again, heat suffusing her wide-eyed face. She touched her lips, which were tingling as she reviewed her final memory of the evening.

Sano... kissed me. And I let him... gods, what was I thinking? Kuso... I wasn't thinking at all, thanks to all that sake...

Misao supposed she should be furious with Sanosuke for taking advantage of her drunken condition. But strangely enough, she wasn't the slightest bit upset with him. On the contrary, all she could think about was how gently he'd pressed his lips to hers... how warm and soft they'd been... how his luminous brown eyes had lingered adoringly on her face after he ended the kiss. And, despite her all-too-willing response, he'd stopped after that one kiss and carried her back to the doujou.

_He could __really__ have taken advantage of the situation... but he didn't. Not that he was a gentleman... but then again, I wasn't behaving like a lady last night, either. We were both running wild... it's no surprise that things ended the way they did. I'm just glad they didn't go any further..._

She lay back on her bed, closed her eyes and sighed, blowing stray strands of hair out of her face. A minute later, someone knocked on her door.

"Misao-chan? Are you awake?" Kaoru said in a loud whisper. "I brought you some tea."

"Hai, Kaoru-san... come on in," Misao said, not moving.

Kaoru entered bearing a steaming, fragrant cup. "How are you feeling?" she asked, looking both concerned and a trifle amused.

"Awful," Misao groaned, sitting up slowly and taking the tea from Kaoru.

"Well, drink that up. It has ginger root and some other herbs in it," Kaoru said, kneeling beside Misao's futon. "Sanosuke swears it'll cure your hangover by lunchtime."

Misao flushed bright red. "S- Sano's here?" she said, her voice shaking slightly. "I thought for sure he'd sleep all day..."

"He came by about an hour ago with the tea. He said he was going back to bed, but that he'd be by later this afternoon to check on you." Kaoru's eyes narrowed a bit. "What exactly happened last night? I thought you were supposed to be looking into the Akabeko robbery."

"We did... and got nowhere," Misao said, sipping the tea in the hope it would relieve her discomfiture. "Sano offered me a drink to cheer me up... guess we got a little carried away..."

Kaoru assumed a prim expression. "I would say you did," she chided. "When Sanosuke brought you home last night, you were out cold. I had him put you straight to bed in the clothes you had on."

Misao wasn't sure why Kaoru's voice had developed an edge... until she looked down at her wrinkled ninja gear.

Her sash was missing.

What the hell... that pervert! He went farther than I thought... too far! I'm gonna beat the living--

Then, Sano's voice came back to her. _... I can do it... if you lend me your sash..._

Misao's anger evaporated as she remembered what had happened. She set her tea cup down, limped over to the corner and reached behind the sack sitting there, pulling out a long piece of fabric.

"Here it is," she said, turning to Kaoru and holding the sash out. "I gave it to Sano to use for carrying that bag. I know it wasn't proper... but I wasn't exactly thinking clearly last night."

"Which is why you should stay away from sake in the future," Kaoru said in a warmer tone as Misao retied her sash. Misao nodded slowly, trying not to aggravate her splitting headache, and sat back down on her futon.

Sighing with relief, Kaoru said, "I really didn't know what to think when Sanosuke brought you home drunk and half-dressed. I'm afraid I assumed that... something... happened between the two of you."

Misao choked on her tea. As she coughed and sputtered, Kaoru stared at her in dismay.

"You mean... something... did?"

Misao shook her head violently, ignoring the pain it caused her. "It's not what you think! He... I... we..." She took a long swig of tea, gasping a bit as it scalded her throat. Emboldened, she continued in a rush, "We... kissed. One kiss, that's it. That's all that happened."

Kaoru's blue eyes snapped as she assumed what Yahiko called her "busu-sensei" expression. It usually meant someone was about to get knocked across the doujou. _Yappari... that's why Sanosuke looked so pleased with himself last night... I'll have to have a little talk with that rooster-headed idiot._

Misao's timid voice interrupted Kaoru's fuming. "Kaoru-san?"

"Nani?" Kaoru responded, making an effort to sound pleasant.

"Ano..." Misao almost lost her courage. Taking a deep breath, she forged ahead. "What was your first kiss like?" she asked, blushing furiously and staring into her tea cup.

Kaoru was silent for a long moment. When Misao finally glanced over at her, she saw that Kaoru was smiling slightly, her expression hazy with memory. She chuckled.

"It's actually a funny story," she said. "I was about 13
--"

"Thirteen?" Misao yelped. "Y- you mean... Himura wasn't..."

Kaoru giggled. "No... Kenshin wasn't my first kiss." Her smile widened. "He was as surprised as you when he found out. But that's a different story."

"Right," Misao said. "So... you were 13..."

"Hai. I often took lessons at a nearby doujou, and some of the boys there had major crushes on me. A couple were bold enough to ask me for a kiss." Kaoru's eyes glinted devilishly. "I told them the day they could defeat me in combat would be the day I would kiss them."

Misao laughed. She could picture a young Kaoru fearlessly making such a statement.

"I didn't think any of them would take me up on my challenge, since I was the best student there," Kaoru continued. "But there was one... Shinko Hiroya, a very skilled and very confident student who was in all my classes. One day after our lesson he came up to me and said he would be honored if I would fight him... if I was willing to make good on my promise, should he defeat me."

She smiled ruefully, shaking her head. "I hated to admit it," she said, "but I was very curious to know what it would be like to be kissed... especially by Hiroya, who I thought was quite handsome. So I accepted his challenge."

Misao clapped her hands together delightedly. "And you let him win, didn't you?"

Kaoru's smile turned vixenish. "Well... I wasn't a total pushover... but I definitely held back some of my best moves. He never suspected a thing." She joined Misao in a hearty laugh.

"Kaoru-san... I never knew you were so sly," Misao grinned. "But you didn't answer my question... how was it?"

"It was... nice," she said. "I liked it well enough... but then his hands got a bit too busy for my taste." The devilish gleam returned. "Let's just say I didn't hold back in that fight... and it was the last kiss he ever got from me."

After another long laugh, Misao studied Kaoru with respect. "So..."

when Himura first kissed you, you knew what to expect," she said.

Kaoru shook her head. "I thought I did," she said softly. "But... the first time Kenshin kissed me... it was unlike any other kiss I'd ever had." Her eyes darkened with remembered feeling. "I don't know if I can explain it properly."

Misao waited silently.

Kaoru finally spoke again. "Comparing Kenshin's kiss to Hiroya's... it would be like comparing a ripple in a pond to a wave in a raging sea," she said, her voice rich with emotion. "When Kenshin kissed me that first time, it awakened so many different feelings in me... all of them so intense. There was nothing I wanted more in that moment than his kiss... his touch... being together like that created a power that was undeniable. It's been that way between us ever since..."

She stopped suddenly, her face crimson. "Ahh... gomen! I didn't mean to be so..." she trailed off, laughing a little in embarrassment. She looked over at Misao, who had a faraway, almost dreamy expression on her face.

"It's all right," she said, her focus returning to Kaoru. "I hope I didn't offend you with my question."

Kaoru smiled. "Not at all... it's nice to talk about these kinds of things with a good friend. But now I have a question for you -- was last night with Sanosuke your first kiss?"

Misao flushed again. "Hai," she said, her voice wistful. "I always thought Aoshi-sama would be... but it's useless to dwell on that..."

Kaoru playfully poked Misao in the shoulder. "Well, don't just sit there... tell me about it! How was it for you?"

Misao's eyes sparkled mischievously. "It was more than a ripple, I'll tell you that." She and Kaoru giggled together.

"That's good," Kaoru said brightly. "A woman's first kiss should be special." Then, more severely -- "He didn't try anything else, did he?"

"No." Misao shook her head, smiling at the memory. "He was very sweet. His kiss was tender... almost careful... like he didn't want to push me too far. I never expected him to be that way."

"No kidding," Kaoru said in amazement. "It doesn't sound like Sanosuke at all."

They were both silent for a time. Then Kaoru asked the same question Misao had been asking herself all morning --

"So... what happens now?"

Misao jumped at the chance to ask her friend for advice. "I wish I knew," she replied anxiously, wringing her hands in her lap. "I don't even know what to say to him when I see him again. Kaoru-san... I

really like Sano, but I don't know if I'm ready for anything more than friendship right now. What should I do?"

Kaoru reached out and squeezed Misao's clasped hands. "Tell him exactly that," she said. "Sanosuke likes it when people are up-front with him... he'll understand." _I'll make damn sure of that,_ Kaoru added grimly to herself.

.....

It was well past lunchtime when Sanosuke finally managed to drag himself out of bed. He didn't have much of a hangover, but despite his lack of sleep the night before, he had lain awake after dropping Misao off at Kamiya Doujou. After tossing and turning for a few hours, he got up and dug out the packet of herbal tea he kept around for emergencies. It was a recipe he'd gotten from the fox-lady that quickly relieved most hangover symptoms, and he knew Misao would be needing it when she woke up. He dropped it off at the doujou, then returned to his apartment and collapsed from exhaustion.

His first waking thought was he should pull himself together and go check on Misao. That got him to sit up and reach for his shirt.

His second was of the kiss they'd shared. That put a broad smile on his face as he finger-combed his wild brown hair.

But it was the third thought that stopped him as he opened the door to leave.

Kuso... what the hell am I doing? Chasing after a woman who's in love with someone else...

He slammed the door shut and sat down heavily, resting his head across his outstretched arms. _Baka-yarou! This is ridiculous. I should know better by now... especially after what happened with Megumi. Tokyo's full of women whose hearts aren't set on any one man... I should find one of those and leave the weasel girl alone._

Even as he tried to convince himself to abandon his interest in Misao, images from the previous night filled his mind. Misao laughing with the gamblers... embracing him after their last win... dashing down the street, her braid flying behind her. Misao responding to his kiss, her sweet lips settling more firmly against his own... the astonished pleasure in her beautiful eyes as he withdrew... the feel of her head resting against his chest... the weight of her in his arms.

It had all felt so... right.

He ground the heels of his hands against his eyes, growling in frustration.

Dammit... it's too late to turn back... I've really got it bad for her. What the hell do I do now?

After a few motionless minutes, Sano sprang up again, his face determined. He would stop at the clinic first, then head for the doujou. He couldn't avoid Misao forever, and it wasn't really his style, anyway. He would meet her head-on and let events unfold as

they would.

As he approached the clinic, he saw Kaoru standing just outside the door. "Sanosuke!" She smiled and walked toward him. "What a coincidence... you're just the person I'm looking for."

Sano felt a slight chill run down his spine as Kaoru eyed him with an almost predatory air. "Sumanu, Jou-chan," he said, backing away. "I just remembered an appointment I have... ja!"

Kaoru grabbed the back of Sanosuke's jacket as he turned to flee. "Oh no you don't," she snarled, yanking him back toward her. "You and I need to talk... now."

.....

Saitou Hajime took another long drag from his cigarette, watching in amusement as Battousai's tanuki-onna dragged that ahou Sagara down the street by his ear. _Even pregnant, she can master a man twice her size. No wonder Tokio took such a liking to her... they're kindred spirits in that way._ A wolfish grin briefly crossed his face as he dropped the butt to the ground and stamped it out. With the tanuki and the tori out of the way, he would have a much easier time questioning the Akabeko women.

Saitou nodded to the guard posted outside the clinic's front door as he entered the building. The old doctor was tending to some patients, but he took the time to call out a greeting to the police inspector.

"Ah, Fujita-san!" He gestured toward the back rooms. "Tae-san is expecting you. Your man can take you to her. Take care not to upset her..."

"I will try, Genzai-sensei," Saitou said, smiling politely. Another police officer trotted up to him and saluted.

"Fujita-san! Please follow me, sir." He led Saitou halfway down the wide hall, turned and rapped twice on a partly open door. "Sekihara-san! Fujita-san is here to see you now."

"Hai... ohairi kudasai," a weak voice replied.

Saitou entered the room slowly, closing the door behind him. "Shitsurei shimasu," he said in the polite, nonthreatening voice he often used as Fujita Goro. He tipped his cap and bowed slightly to Tae, who turned her head to acknowledge him.

"Konnichiwa, Fujita-san," she said. "How can I help you today?"

A corner of Saitou's mouth quirked upward. _Ever the hostess, eh, Sekihara-san?_ She was all pleasant politeness now, but Saitou had caught the nervous edge in her voice as she invited him inside.

"First, let me express my regret for your present condition," he said in his Fujita voice, "as well as my hope that you enjoy a speedy recovery."

"Arigatou gozaimasu," Tae said, relaxing almost imperceptibly.

"That's very kind of you."

"I am here to talk to you about the robbery," Saitou continued. "I know this is not the best time for you... but we are working very hard to find the men that perpetrated this terrible crime. Any help you can give us would be much appreciated."

Tae sighed, shaking her head. "I only wish I could help," she said. "But I don't remember anything about that night. Genzai-sensei told me I took a heavy blow to the head, and that could be why my memory is gone." She closed her good eye. "It's been very upsetting."

Saitou examined the woman closely through narrowed eyes. She sounded appropriately distressed, and her features expressed nothing more than regret and a little frustration. However, as his gaze traveled downward, he noted that her left hand was gripping her blanket so tightly her knuckles whitened.

Naruhodo... so her amnesia is self-induced. Just like the others. These scum are good...

He scowled. He hated to admit it, but he needed additional resources if he were to continue his pursuit. Good thing he had just been offered some outside help... the offer was unusual, but Saitou knew the source to be highly reliable. _Especially since this source now has a vested interest in this case... I saw to that myself._

"I see. I'm very sorry to have disturbed you, Sekihara-san," he said, masking his impatience and irritation. "If you remember anything about that night... no matter how insignificant it might seem... please have my men notify me immediately."

"Of course, Fujita-san. Gomen nasai," Tae said, lowering her eye. "I hope you find those terrible people soon."

"As do I," Saitou said, allowing a trace of menace to color his words. "After all... there's no telling when they may strike again. Or where."

Saitou's remark hit home. Tae shuddered slightly, remembering her late-night visitor. _You're right about that, Fujita-san..._

"Try not to worry, Sekihara-san," Saitou said, reassuming his police-inspector tone. "The clinic is well-guarded. No one will be bothering you here. By the way, how is your young waitress? I was hoping to speak with her as well."

Oh no... Tsubame-chan! I completely forgot about her! Fighting to remain calm, Tae said, "Oh, Tsubame-chan! She's doing better... but she's likely sleeping right now. Genzai-sensei has been adamant about her getting plenty of rest. I myself have only seen her once since we got here."

"I'm glad she's recovering," Saitou said, observing Tae's too-casual smile. _Hmmm... so you don't want me talking to her. Interesting..._ "I won't disturb her right now. Take care of yourself, Sekihara-san."

Saitou smiled triumphantly as he slipped her door closed.

"Ichiro-kun... please take me to young Tsubame-san's room," he said to the waiting officer.

.....

"Oi, Jou-chan... let go! You're tearing my ear off!"

Kaoru released Sanosuke in front of the closed Akabeko. "All right, Sanosuke. Time for you to explain yourself," she said, placing her hands on her hips and tapping her foot.

"Explain what?" Sano had no idea what the hell she was talking about. _Che, what did I do now? Is she pissed about the scarecrow? Or maybe she thinks I've been picking on Yutarou too much again..._

"You know what," Kaoru snapped, marching up to him. "Misao-chan told me everything about last night."

Sano's face fell. "E- everything?" he squeaked. _Uh-oh... I'm in trouble now..._

"Yeah, everything. You listen here, baka-yarou," Kaoru said, her eyes shooting sparks as she glared up at him. "I won't have you playing around with Misao-chan the way you do with other girls. She's been hurt enough as it is."

Sanosuke felt his face flush with anger. "Chotto, Jou-chan!" he growled, advancing a step. "Who says this is any of your business?"

"As long as Misao-chan is staying with me and Kenshin, it's my business what happens to her," Kaoru said firmly. "I promised Omasu-san I would look out for her... and that's what I'm doing now by telling you to leave her alone!"

She doesn't trust me. The thought pained Sano... which made him even angrier. "Jou-chan... I'd advise you to drop this," he said in a low, dangerous voice. "In case you haven't noticed, Misao is a grown woman... she can make her own decisions about who she sees."

Kaoru wasn't frightened by Sano's anger. But she was surprised by something else she'd glimpsed in his eyes as he glowered down at her. _He looks... hurt. Insulted. Could I have been wrong about his intentions?_

"That may be so," she said, deliberately lowering her voice. "But she's very confused right now. I don't want you making things harder for her."

Sano exhaled in exasperation. "I don't want to, either," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Is she upset about last night?"

"Not at all," Kaoru admitted. "I'm the one who got mad at you. I thought..."

"... that I got Misao drunk on purpose?" Sanosuke finished. "Che, Jou-chan... you don't think much of me, do you?" His tone was definitely hurt this time. Feeling foolish, Kaoru reached out to put her hand on his arm, but he jerked away.

"Gomen nasai, Sanosuke," Kaoru said sincerely, her eyes misting. "You know I care about you... but you don't exactly have a great reputation when it comes to women. And I care about Misao-chan, too."

Part of Sanosuke wanted to stay pissed at Jou-chan... but she really did look sorry, and her eyes were getting all watery. _Kenshin'll kick my ass for sure if I make her cry._ He laid his hand on top of Kaoru's head. "Forget it," he said, mussing her hair a bit. "C'mon, I'll walk you back to the doujou."

As they headed slowly down the street, Sanosuke said, "Jou-chan, when you said Misao had been hurt enough... what did you mean? Has she told you what's been bothering her?"

Kaoru looked up at him. "Iie," she said, her blue eyes troubled. "But I know something's been weighing on her since her arrival in Tokyo. I've tried asking her about it, but she just brushes it off. Says she doesn't want to worry me over something that's in the past now."

"She won't tell me, either," Sanosuke said. "It really bugs me. On the outside, she seems like her old, cheerful self... but underneath there's this sadness she won't share with anyone. My guess is it has something to do with Shinomori Aoshi."

"That's what Omasu-san thinks as well," Kaoru said. "In the letter Misao-chan brought me when she first came to the doujou, Omasu-san told me that Misao-chan had been very subdued since Aoshi-sama left the Aoiya several weeks before. She thinks they had words the night he departed... apparently, Misao-chan spent the first few days after he left in her room and wouldn't see anyone, not even Okina-san. When she finally emerged, she refused to discuss anything that had happened. Okon-san and Omasu-san told everyone to leave her alone, thinking she would eventually open up to one of them... but she never did."

"And now she won't talk to any of us about it," Sanosuke said, clenching his fist. "We'll keep trying... hopefully, she'll get it off her chest one of these days."

Suddenly, Yahiko came racing up to them, yelling frantically. "Kaoru! Sanosuke! You gotta get to the clinic!"

"Doushita, Yahiko?" Sanosuke responded.

"It's Saitou! He's with Tsubame-chan right now, pumping her for information." The boy gripped his shinai, clenching his teeth in anger. "The bastard threw me out of her room... we have to stop him!"

"Yahiko, calm down! Saitou is a police officer," Kaoru said, grabbing the boy by the shoulders. "No matter how much you dislike him, you can't stop him from talking to Tsubame-chan. She may be able to tell him something that will help him find those thieves."

While Kaoru spoke to Yahiko, Sanosuke turned away from them and began running toward the clinic. "Matte, Sanosuke! Where do you think you're going?" Kaoru shouted.

Sanosuke yelled back over his shoulder, "Don't worry, Jou-chan... I won't get myself arrested. Ja na!" As he picked up speed, Sano thought --

We'll see who bests who this time, Saitou Hajime!

-- End of Chapter 7 --

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****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://www2.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****Chapter 8 -- Pulling Together****

"There," Genzai-sensei said as he finished wrapping the bandage around Misao's ankle. "That's finished... Misao-chan, I want you to stay off that ankle for a couple of days. No training for the rest of the week. And no more jumping around on rooftops, all right?"

Misao dropped the hem of her kimono and let loose a lengthy sigh. "Wakatta," she said glumly. Thankfully, her ankle was only twisted, not broken. But still, she was mortified that her clumsiness the night before should result in her having to postpone her training, even if only for a few days. _Unmei-sensei is going to kill me!_

As she slid down off the table, Kenshin moved forward, slipping an arm around her waist. "Here, Misao-dono... let me help you. You can lean on me," he said, his other arm tightening around Kintou.

"That's okay, Himura," Misao said. "Just hand me that crutch over there, and I'll be fine. Arigatou, Genzai-sensei!"

The old doctor waved her away. "Dou itashimashite. Just be sure I don't see you again for anything other than visiting people, ne?"

"Hai, hai," Misao grumbled, tucking the wooden crutch under her arm. "Ne, Himura, where's Kaoru-san? It's her turn now."

"She told me she was going outside for some air," Kenshin said. "I'll go get her. Why don't you wait here, Misao-dono?"

She nodded as Kenshin left the room, the soft slap of his sandals fading down the hall. Misao leaned back against the wall near the open doorway, grimacing as her ankle throbbed dully. She closed her eyes, letting her mind drift. The worst of her hangover was gone, thanks to Sano's tea, but she was still very tired.

After a few moments, she heard faint voices coming from further down the hall. Thinking it must be the Himuras, she limped out of the room to greet them. Instead, she saw a familiar figure in a gray Tokyo police uniform standing in the hall talking to Genzai-sensei. She clenched her jaw in irritation.

Damn that Saitou! Can't he leave everyone in peace for a change?

She strained to hear what they were saying, but she was too far away from them. Besides, Saitou had already spotted her -- he hadn't turned his head, but Misao experienced the vague prickling sensation she always got when someone was observing her. _Well, fine. To hell with sneaking around, then..._

She made her way awkwardly down the hall, sounding to her ears like a herd of cattle clomping across the wooden floor. Saitou turned to face her, his mocking smile indicating a similar thought.

"Well... if it isn't the noisy little weasel girl," he said, glancing at her crutch. "What brings you here? Did you hurt yourself trying to walk in those women's clothes?"

"Kono...!" Misao hissed, struggling against the urge to reach inside her obi for the kunai tucked there. "If you weren't a policeman, I'd --"

"I'm sure you would," Saitou interrupted dryly, turning to the doctor. "Arigatou, sensei. Please inform me immediately of any changes in your patients' conditions." He turned to leave, but Misao blocked his path, glaring at him.

"Chotto matte yo! I want to ask you something," Misao said.

Saitou raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" he said, looking amused.

They were interrupted by a familiar voice bellowing outside --

"Saitou Hajime! I know you're in there, you sneaky bastard! Come out here so I can kick your ass!"

Misao reddened a bit as she recognized Sano's distinctive roar. Saitou rolled his eyes, making a sound somewhere between a sigh and a snort. "Yare, yare," he said, fishing a cigarette out of his pocket. "I'm surrounded by ahous." Placing the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, he nimbly side-stepped around Misao and headed for the door.

"Hey! I'm not finished with you!" Misao yelled, hobbling after him.

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Sanosuke glared at the police guard outside the clinic, who had drawn his sword in response to the street fighter's shouted challenge. "I'd advise you to be on your way... or I'll have to arrest you!" the young officer snapped.

"And I'd advise you to put your toy sword away, little boy," Sanosuke sneered. "I'm here for your boss, not you..."

Just then, Saitou emerged from the clinic. He paused just outside the door to light his cigarette, then walked toward the two men, waving dismissively at the guard. "Return to your post," he said calmly. "I'll handle this imbecile."

The guard nodded, sheathing his sword and saluting as he followed Saitou's orders. Sanosuke smiled slightly and cracked his knuckles in anticipation. "I think it's high time we finish the fight we started two years ago," he said. "I've been looking forward to this for a long time."

Saitou stared coolly at Sanosuke, flicking ash from his cigarette. "Feh. I had some information for you, but I think I'll keep it to myself for now," he said, shrugging and turning away. "Stop by my office when you decide to stop making an ass of yourself." He looked over his shoulder, smirking. "But then... that would be impossible for you, wouldn't it?"

Sanosuke snarled and started to spring toward the insolent officer. He was brought up short by Misao's furious yell --

"Chotto, Saitou! Ignore me, will you?"

Sano turned toward Misao, who stood just outside the doorway of the clinic. He took in her angry face... the kunai she held in one hand... and the crutch on which she was leaning heavily. His eyes widened as he rushed over to her.

"Misao! Your leg... are you all right?" He caught sight of the bandage peeking out from beneath her kimono hem. "It's not broken, is it?" he asked anxiously.

Misao blushed, remembering how worried Sano had looked after her fall the night before. He wore a similar expression now. "Iie... Genzai-sensei says it's just a light sprain," she said, looking at the ground. "It'll be good as new after a few days rest."

Saitou had stopped to see what on earth could possibly have caused Sagara to lose interest in taking his bait. The answer lay in the scene unfolding before him, prompting a satisfied smile from Saitou. _Naruhodo... so the chicken has a yen for the weasel. This knowledge could prove __very__ useful..._

With a low chuckle, he turned away once more... then froze as he saw Battousai and his young apprentice approaching from a short distance away. The boy held Battousai's child... while Battousai awkwardly

carried his wife, her face twisted in agony.

Saitou briskly walked up to them. "Doushita, Battousai?" His eyes narrowed at Kenshin's panic-stricken expression.

"No time... we have to get her inside!" Kenshin panted. "Something is very wrong with her... it could be the babies!"

Saitou absently flicked his cigarette onto the ground. He extended his hands to his longtime enemy. "May I?" he asked.

Kenshin gritted his teeth, clutching Kaoru protectively to his chest. Kaoru looked up at her husband, forcing a smile through the pain. "It's all right, beloved," she whispered.

Kenshin hesitated for one moment more, then nodded stiffly. Saitou effortlessly swept Kaoru into his arms and ran for the clinic, Kenshin at his heels.

.....

"So this is why you've been so distracted lately," Kenshin said softly as he wiped Kaoru's face with a damp cloth. "Why didn't you tell me, koishii?"

Kaoru smiled wearily. "Because you've been hovering over me enough as it is, Kenshin. I didn't want to give you more cause for alarm." She closed her eyes, her voice barely a whisper. "And I was afraid... I didn't want to stop teaching just yet. We really need the money... and I knew if you found out about the pains, you'd make me quit." Tears slipped down her cheeks. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you... can you forgive me?"

"Oh, Kaoru," Kenshin whispered tenderly, leaning over and kissing the tears from her eyes. "My sweet Kaoru... promise me you'll share your worries with me from now on. You should know by now that together we can get through anything. And all the money in the world would be meaningless to me if I lost you or our children."

Kaoru opened her eyes and smiled. "I promise, anata. No more keeping secrets," she said. Then, in a lower voice -- "Aishiteru, Kenshin."

"Mou aishiteru, Kaoru," Kenshin replied, his violet eyes shimmering with adoration.

Genzai-sensei entered the room, followed by Yahiko, Sanosuke and Misao. "Are you feeling better, Kaoru-san?" Misao asked.

Kaoru nodded, grasping Kenshin's hand. "The pains are gone now," she said, glancing at the doctor.

"That's good news," Genzai-sensei said. "But Kaoru-chan, I'm still very concerned about you. It's much too soon for those babies to come... and that's the second time you've had birthing pains in as many weeks. So I've decided -- I'm ordering you to stay in bed until it's time for the birth." He glowered at her, shaking his finger. "And when I say stay in bed, I mean just that! No more teaching... no more training... no more chores. And I don't want you walking any further than the doujou's bath house. Wakatta?"

Kaoru bit her lip, looking up at Kenshin. He smiled reassuringly, squeezing her hand. "Wakatte de gozaru, Genzai-sensei," Kenshin said. "I'll see to it that Kaoru gets plenty of rest and is well-cared for."

"Atashi mou!" Misao chimed in, while Sanosuke and Yahiko nodded vigorously. "You can count on us to help, Himura!"

Kenshin smiled gratefully at his friends. "Arigatou de gozaru, minna," he said. "Genzai-sensei, can we bring Kaoru home now?"

"Hai... but remember -- straight to bed, Kaoru-chan! I'll be by to check on you tomorrow," the doctor said.

.....

The first two days after Kaoru was confined to bed passed in a blur for Misao. She was busy from dawn until night doing as much housework as she could with her sore ankle. Everyone else was pitching in, too -- even Yutarou, who still came to the doujou every day to practice and spar with Yahiko.

By the third day, Misao couldn't stand it any longer. Her ankle felt fine -- she could even put her full weight on it without so much as a twinge of pain -- and she was starting to feel claustrophobic staying within the doujou grounds all day. She knew there was no way Unmei-sensei would allow her to train against doctor's orders... but Misao felt that surely she would be all right getting some light exercise in her favorite nearby practice field. She slipped away right after lunch, using yet another loud argument between Yahiko and Yutarou to cover her exit. Kaoru and Kintou were sleeping, and Kenshin was so busy trying to keep the boys apart that she had no problem escaping his notice.

Just getting outside the doujou's walls made Misao feel better. She started with some light stretching, then concentrated on her upper body, practicing punches and blocks and standing kunai throws. Tentatively, she began practicing kicks, her confidence strengthening as her tightly wrapped left ankle continued to bear her weight painlessly during the workout.

"Uh oh... looks like I got here just in time."

Panting, Misao whirled around to discover Sanosuke standing behind her. Despite his bantering tone, he was not smiling. "Misao, what the hell are you doing out here? Aren't you supposed to be taking it easy for another couple of days?"

"Mou! Don't you start in on me, too!" Misao groaned, throwing her arms wide open in frustration. "I needed to get out for awhile, okay? I was going nuts just sitting around chopping vegetables and doing dishes... and if I had to listen to Yutarou and Yahiko arguing over who can kick whose butt one more time, I was going to seriously hurt both of them!"

Sanosuke burst out laughing. "Well... I guess I can see your point," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "But are you sure you're okay? Your ankle doesn't --"

Misao shook her head vigorously. "No, my ankle doesn't hurt. Honto ni, Sano... I swear I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't feel up to it. The last thing I want is to hurt myself further... Himura and Kaoru-san certainly don't need the burden right now."

Sano nodded, meeting Misao's somber eyes. "You've been anything but a burden to them, you know," he said, quelling the urge to embrace her. "Kenshin was telling me yesterday how grateful he is that you're here... he says your presence has helped keep him strong through all this, and that you've been a great comfort to Jou-chan as well."

Misao lowered her eyes modestly, her expression in direct contrast to the surge of pride Sano's comments raised within her. "I just wish I could do more for them," she murmured.

Sanosuke gave in to his now-overwhelming impulse to touch her, moving forward and squeezing her shoulder. "You do enough," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Now, let's get your spirits back up. Forget those straw dummies... how about sparring with a real partner for a change? I promise I'll be careful of your ankle."

Misao eyed his cocky grin, placing her hands on her hips and raising an eyebrow. "I don't know," she said, her eyes dancing impishly. "One of us might get hurt... and how would I cope with the guilt?"

"Laugh while you can, itachi-chan," Sano said, his grin widening. "You'll have a hard time laughing with your face in the dirt. What do you say... first one to get pinned loses... and loser buys the winner dinner?"

Misao nodded gleefully. "Yoshi. Let's do it!"

At first, it was more like play. Sanosuke gave Misao the offensive position, but Misao held back her more serious moves, putting only half her strength into her jabs and kicks. Sanosuke easily dodged most of her blows, and the few she landed made him snort derisively, "Che, Misao... is that how that old-bat instructor of yours teaches you to fight? You did better years ago in Kyoto! C'mon... put some heart into it!" His eyes glittered. "Unless you want to lose... maybe you're looking forward to being pinned by me, ne?"

That last gibe rattled Misao, reminding her of Kaoru's first-kiss story. But surely, she wasn't pulling the same trick... was she? She gritted her teeth. _Of course not! That damned egomaniac... who the hell does he think he is? I'll show him!_

"Kyaaaaa!" she roared, putting all her strength and speed behind the punch she'd recently learned from Unmei-sensei. Surprisingly, Sano made no move to block or avoid it. It connected perfectly, sending the tall man crashing to the ground. Misao ran up to him triumphantly, bending down to pin him with her knee. "Hah! Not bad for a little weasel... ne, chicken-..."

Misao fell silent as she observed Sano. His eyes remained closed... and his face was pale and still. Panic swelled within her. _No! There's no way... he's gotten up after much worse than that!_ She knelt beside him, tears welling in her eyes. "Sano... wake up... you're scaring me," she cried, reaching out to touch his cheek. "Sano

-- eep!"

Sano's eyes snapped open as he grabbed her wrist, neatly rolling over with her until she was lying on her back. Holding her arm above her head, his other hand pressed firmly against her stomach, he smiled victoriously. "Give up?" he said.

Misao sputtered with rage. "You... dirty... sneaky... trickster! That wasn't fair!" she protested, pummeling his chest with her free hand.

"I never promised to fight fair, did I?" Sano responded mischievously. "Besides... it was about time I paid you back for the scare you gave me a few nights ago." Misao wriggled in his grasp, cursing him loudly as he laughed at her.

Finally, Sano released Misao and sat up, holding his hand out to her. She glared at him, folding her arms and turning her head away from him. Her snub only heightened Sano's amusement. _She's so damned _cute_ when she's mad..._

"Fine... be that way," Sano said, feigning exasperation. "What a sore loser..."

Misao's head snapped back to center... and Sano saw with delight that she was fighting back a smile. "I may be a loser... but at least I didn't have to cheat to beat someone half my size," she said loftily. Her comment made both of them chuckle.

"Sou da na," Sano said, extending his hand to her again. This time, she took it, allowing Sano to pull her to a sitting position.

"Arigatou," Misao said, keeping her hand in his.

"Dou itashimashite," Sano replied, tightening his grip ever so slightly.

Time ceased to exist once more. Misao realized she was staring deeply into Sano's eyes, mesmerized as they darkened with emotion. She knew with absolute certainty that he was going to kiss her again... but it was her next realization that left her breathless --

_I _want_ him to... more than anything..._

Sano wanted badly to pull Misao into his arms and kiss her... hard... but he kept her at arm's-length, his hand clasping hers, waiting for her to give him some sort of sign. After Jou-chan's scolding, he had decided not to pressure Misao... but if she returned his affections, he had every intention of following through, regardless of the risks involved. _Sumanu, Jou-chan..._

Sano watched the uncertainty and confusion in Misao's eyes dissolve into mute longing, her mouth dropping open slightly. It was more than enough for him. He lowered his head toward hers -- and was pleasantly surprised when she met him halfway.

Misao experienced the same heady sensations she'd felt the first time Sano kissed her... only sharper this time, since there was no sake blurring the edges of her mind and body. She rose up onto her knees,

pressing her mouth hard against his, wanting with all her being to be closer to him. _Why won't he hold me?_

As before, Misao's ardent response was unbearably arousing to Sano. _Gods, I want her so much... but it's too soon... have to control myself. Best to take it slowly... even if it kills me._ He reluctantly ended the kiss, brushing her nose with his as he gazed into her eyes, which were warm with desire and tinged with... disappointment?

"Sano..." Misao whispered, stroking his cheek.

"Aa," he replied shakily.

She raised her face to his, her mouth sensually curving around each word. "Mou ichi-do... onegai..."

Misao's impassioned request wiped all rational thought from Sanosuke's mind. With a murmured assent, he pulled her slender frame toward him and covered her half-open mouth with his own, tenderly stroking her slightly parted lips with the tip of his tongue. Misao opened her mouth fully in response, her muffled groan of pleasure mingled with the growl of satisfaction rising in Sano's throat as his tongue caressed hers, coaxing her to respond in kind. His fingers ran through the loose fringe of soft black hair framing her face... down the sides of her graceful neck... her delicate shoulders... her arms... finally coming to rest on either side of her waist. His hands tightened there, pulling her closer to him, eliciting a brief, needy moan from Misao as she pressed the length of her body against his and wrapped her arms around his neck.

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Kenshin walked rapidly down the path leading to market, Kintou tucked against his hip and an empty tofu bucket in his hand. Kaoru had practically ordered him out of the doujou, saying she needed some time alone, so could he get some tofu for dinner, please? He agreed reluctantly... and only after Yahiko promised to stop fighting with Yutarou long enough to keep an eye on Kaoru while Kenshin was gone. Kenshin sighed, acknowledging that he was actually glad for the break. _Those boys could drive a monk to the sake bottle!_

Kintou babbled cheerfully, tugging on some loose strands of Kenshin's hair. Kenshin smiled, shaking his head playfully while Kintou chortled. As they walked, something moving in the field next to them caught Kenshin's eye. He stopped... and stared wide-eyed at the sight of Sanosuke and Misao, locked in a passionate embrace. They were both on their knees... holding each other tightly... kissing deeply.

Kenshin smiled thoughtfully. _So... Kaoru was right... things have gotten serious between them._ Unlike his wife, Kenshin was actually pleased by the idea, for the most part.

Still... they should be a little more... discreet. Though I'm one to talk, considering the audience Kaoru and I had when we first kissed. He grinned sheepishly at the memory.

Kintou, who had been unusually quiet while Kenshin reflected, suddenly caught sight of Misao's black braid shining in the sun. He

squealed, waving his arms in Misao's direction.

The noise had the same effect as a bucket of ice water on the couple. They pushed away from each other, leaping to their feet. Misao's face was as red as Kenshin's hair, and even Sanosuke had the good grace to blush a little.

"H- H- Himura!" Misao squeaked. "H- h- how long... were you..."

"Long enough," Kenshin said quietly as Kintou strained against his grasp, whining for Misao. Desperate for a diversion, she took the baby from Kenshin, laughing as he reached up to grab her nose.

"Misao-dono... would you take Kintou back to the doujou?" Kenshin asked. "Sano and I are going to town to pick up tofu for dinner." He eyed Sano expectantly.

"Sounds good to me," Sano said. When Kenshin looked at him that way, it was best not to argue. "I'll see you at dinner, Misao."

"All right," Misao said, her eyes lingering on his for a moment. She then looked pleadingly at Kenshin. "Ne, Himura... don't be too hard on him."

Kenshin couldn't help chuckling at that. "You have my word, Misao-dono." Satisfied, she turned and headed back to the doujou, singing a song about falling leaves to Kintou.

As she disappeared around the bend, Sanosuke raised his hands to Kenshin. "Before you say anything, Kenshin... Jou-chan already gave me a lecture about being careful of Misao's feelings," Sano said. "And I intend to be... okay?"

Kenshin shook his head. "Actually, I'm more worried about your feelings than Misao-dono's," he said.

Sanosuke gaped at his friend. "Why the hell would you be worried about me?"

Kenshin considered his question for a moment. "Because... Misao-dono has not forgotten Aoshi," he said gently. "She still loves him. And as long as her heart is with Aoshi, she cannot fully give it to you."

Sano stared off into the distance, his expression troubled. Kenshin hoped he hadn't wounded Sano's pride too deeply with his honesty.

When Sano looked back at Kenshin, however, his eyes were determined. "I can wait," he said, more to himself than to Kenshin. "Until Misao is over Aoshi... I'll wait for her." He then slapped a shocked Kenshin on the back. "We'd better go get that food before Jou-chan sends out a search party," he said with a wink.

Sanosuke started down the path, whistling. Kenshin stood for a moment, pondering what Sano had said.

He didn't say what his feelings were... but if he's willing to wait

for her... he has to be in love with her._

Beaming, Kenshin hurried after Sanosuke, swinging the tofu tub in the air.

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"Fujita-san! Your contact from Kyoto is here!"

Saitou looked up from the documents he was reading. "Excellent," he said to the officer. "Please send him in."

He set the documents down and got up from behind his desk. _At last, the additional resource I needed is here. Now the hunt will pick up speed._

The officer appeared in the doorway again, motioning to someone behind him. Saitou allowed himself a small smile as his contact entered the office. He greeted the visitor with a nod and said --

"It's been a long time... Shinomori Aoshi."

Aoshi nodded in return. "It has indeed, Saitou Hajime," he said, his face expressionless. "Let's get to work, shall we?"

-- End of Chapter 8 --

9. These Changing Times

RK Fanfic: These Changing Times (Chapter 9)

****Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic: These Changing Times****

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://www2.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****Chapter 9 -- Renewing Old Acquaintances****

"So... that's all the information I've been able to gather so far," Saitou said as Aoshi set down the documents he'd been reading. "The Sanjou girl was surprisingly helpful... obviously, whoever has been

orchestrating these thefts hasn't gotten to her yet."

"Or else... they don't consider her a threat," Aoshi said.

Saitou smiled slightly. "Their mistake," he said. "She didn't see much, but the few details she was able to provide me were quite useful." He tapped the papers Aoshi had set down. "Now that you've read all this... did you recognize anything about these men or their leader?"

Aoshi leaned forward, planting his elbows on Saitou's desk and clasping his hands. He rested his chin on his hands, his brow furrowed as he pondered. Finally, he said, "No. Nothing."

Saitou's eyes narrowed. "There has to be a connection," he said sharply. "There's no reason for these men to be calling themselves Oniwabanshuu unless at least some of them used to be Oniwabanshuu."

Aoshi's gaze remained steady as he sat up straight again. "I agree," he said, his voice unruffled. "However, while in Kyoto, I spent a considerable amount of time with our Okina reviewing all records on existing former and current Oniwabanshuu. Any renegades that surfaced over the past several years were dealt with. The rest of the Oniwabanshuu still living today are either part of our network, or under constant surveillance by our network. It is highly unlikely that any of them could have escaped our attention long enough to coordinate something like this."

Saitou took a long drag from his cigarette. After exhaling, he said, "I hope you're wrong. Otherwise, it was a waste of my time to summon you here."

The corners of Aoshi's mouth tipped upward almost imperceptibly. It was unusual to see Mibu's Wolf so overtly frustrated. _A proud, arrogant man... used to being in total control... it must have taken much for him to request my assistance._

"I have no intention of wasting your time or mine, Saitou," Aoshi said calmly. His blue eyes glinted ominously as he continued, "Whether these thugs are former Oniwabanshuu or not, I intend to see them brought to justice for degrading our name. In this, I'll help you as I can."

Saitou smiled slightly. "I thought you might feel that way," he said. "So, I have an assignment for you tonight, if you're interested."

Aoshi nodded. Saitou proceeded to pull out three files containing records and photographs of three Tokyo police officers. He spread the materials out on the desk. As Aoshi reviewed them, Saitou explained --

"I was recently informed that several weeks ago, an attempted robbery took place at the Akabeko. This robbery attempt was covered up by a man wearing the uniform and carrying the identification of a Tokyo police officer. He gave his name as Lt. Hiroshi Washuu. At first, I thought it may have been an imposter working for the yakuza conducting these robberies... but upon further investigation, I have deduced the man is an actual officer taking bribes to conceal the

dealings of these yakuza from the police. I have since narrowed down my search to these three suspects."

Aoshi glanced over the identification papers. "None of these officers has that name," he said.

"That name doesn't exist anywhere in our files," Saitou replied. "Therefore, it must be an alias. All three of these men have official access that would allow them to forge a separate set of identification papers with that name. I need you to select the most likely suspect and follow him until he attempts to meet with his yakuza contact."

"Have you received intelligence suggesting the thieves are about to strike again?"

"They've been quiet since the Akabeko robbery a few nights ago... but I expect them to resurface very soon. Their pattern indicates they will likely attempt another robbery either tonight or tomorrow."

Aoshi nodded again. He then pointed at the center photograph. "This one," he said. "Lt. Umari Shozo."

"That was quick," Saitou said. "Are you sure? Lt. Umari has a fine record with numerous commendations."

"His profile fits," Aoshi replied. "I should know for sure if he's the one by morning. If so, I'll bring him in for questioning."

"All right," Saitou said. His eyes gleamed wickedly. "Will you be needing any assistance from your people, Shinomori? Your young onmitsu, Makimachi Misao, has been staying at Kamiya Doujou. I'm sure she would be glad to help you in any way she can."

Aoshi didn't so much as twitch at the mention of Misao's name. "Misao's assistance won't be necessary," he replied, his voice even.

"Maybe so. But you may not have much of a choice in the matter... since she's taken it upon herself to investigate the Akabeko robbery with Sagara Sanosuke."

"Sagara Sanosuke?" Aoshi's face remained blank, but his tone indicated puzzlement. "What does he have to do with this? Is he working for you, too?"

Saitou let out a harsh bark of laughter. "Hardly," he snorted, taking another leisurely drag. "I'm not that desperate. He's the one who found the Sanjou girl the night of the robbery... and he's the one who broke up the first Akabeko robbery attempt. He's very protective of that place... it's the only restaurant in Tokyo that allows him to run an eternal tab."

Aoshi ignored Saitou's last statement. "And you say Misao is now checking into this with him," he said. "How do you know that if they're not working for you?"

"I know because she tried to ask me about the robberies a few days ago. Sagara was with her then, so I assumed the ahou put her up to

it." Saitou paused, then went on thoughtfully, "You know, I've seen them around together quite a bit in recent weeks. You may want to tell her to choose her friends more carefully..."

Aoshi didn't respond. Instead, he stood abruptly, picking up the information on Umari. "If you'll excuse me, Saitou... I should be getting started," he said flatly. "I'll be in touch later tonight."

"Of course." Saitou couldn't help smirking as he observed the clearly distracted onmitsu. _That shot definitely hit its mark... I'll wager he'll be paying Sagara a visit before the night is through. That should be revenge enough for now... ahou ga._

As Aoshi walked away from the police building, his thoughts drifted away from the task at hand... and back to the last time he'd been with Misao. He closed his eyes, picturing her face as he had last seen it... pale and stricken... streaked with tears... again because of him. He could almost hear her anguished plea as she reached out to him...

... Aoshi-sama... why? Why can't you at least try? I don't understand...

Remembering his harsh reply still made him cringe inside --

... I know, Misao... so I'll make it plain -- there's nothing between us... and there never will be...

... Sayonara...

His eyes snapped open. _Enough. I have a job to do... and no time for regrets. I made my choice... and it was the right thing to do. It's for the best..._

With that thought firmly in place, Aoshi disappeared into the darkening evening.

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"Delivery for you, ojou-san!" Sano called cheerfully as he entered the kitchen. Kenshin had handed the tofu tub to Sano as soon as they were inside the doujou gate so he could run off to check on Kaoru. Not that Sano minded playing delivery-boy... it gave him a chance to be alone with Misao, if only for a minute or two.

"Arigatou, Sano... just put it over there," Misao said, gesturing toward the counter.

Sano set the tub of tofu down, watching Misao's slender hands as they chopped a carrot into perfect matchstick-sized pieces. She had barely glanced at him since he came in, but he had seen her cheeks flush slightly and heard her breath quicken as he passed behind her. A sly smile crossed his face. _Hmm... wonder what she would do if I..._

He moved to stand behind her, putting his hands on her hips as he bent down and pressed an open-mouthed kiss against the back of her neck. She stiffened, the knife slowing to a halt as he grazed her skin with his teeth, then leaned over to whisper directly into her ear --

"So... what's for dinner, pretty lady?"

Misao marveled at how a kiss that wasn't even on her mouth could do such amazing things to her insides. She tried to keep chopping, but when Sano began nibbling her earlobe, she gave up and leaned back into him, sighing as she set her knife down. "There won't be anything for dinner," she said, striving for a scolding tone, "if you keep distracting me --"

Sano tipped her head around and kissed her mid-sentence. Misao forgot the vegetables and turned slowly to face him, returning his kiss as eagerly as she had earlier that day in the field. He tightened his hold on her hips, pulling her closer, humming in approval. They deepened the kiss simultaneously, each tasting the other fully, their tongues tangling greedily. Misao stood on tiptoe, sliding her arms up around Sano's neck, twining one hand in his unruly brown hair. _Mmm... it's softer than I expected... yet... a little coarse, a little wild... just like him..._

Somewhere in the swirl of arousal engulfing Misao, a still-rational part of her mind noted that this kiss was different -- hungrier, bolder. It gave her the feeling of being caught in a current, rushing toward some inevitable precipice... but strangely, she didn't feel helpless or fearful. She knew that should she say the word, she could step outside the current and stop the rush... or with a different word, a different touch, speed their journey along. Such was the power Sano had wordlessly granted her from the moment of their first kiss.

He makes the first move, but always holds back... making sure I want this, too. And... I do... I do... She shuddered with pleasure, stroking the back of his neck lightly with her fingertips, smiling against his mouth as he shivered in response.

As their kiss grew more heated, one thought kept tumbling over and over in Sano's barely conscious mind. _She __wants__ me... hard to believe... but I know it's true..._ He could see the desire in her eyes... feel it in her body... taste it in her kisses. His patient, persistent overtures were paying off. He pressed closer to her, reveling in the feel of her soft curves against him, noting with satisfaction that she was wearing very little padding beneath her kimono. He was glad -- he hated that sexless, perfectly cylindrical look most women in kimono tried to achieve. He idly wondered what else he would find underneath her outer garments if he --

Baka-yarou! We're in the middle of the kitchen, for crying out loud... anyone could walk in and see us. He flinched as he imagined the endless lectures Kenshin and Jou-chan would give him if they caught him messing with Misao again. At that same moment, Misao tentatively ran her hands over his bare chest, sending delicious tingles throughout his body.

Ahh... yes... no, wait... we'd better stop. And since Misao seems to have forgotten herself, I guess it's up to me. He grinned inwardly. _This should be fun..._

Sano broke the kiss, reaching down to squeeze Misao's shapely rear. She jerked and gasped, her eyes as round as dinner plates as he

purred in her ear --

"How about I skip dinner and have you instead?"

Misao shoved Sano away, reaching inside her obi. "Hentai!" she growled, her face flaming. "You went too far this time!"

"Did I?" he laughed, easily dodging her kunai. "You certainly weren't complaining before. Did I pinch you too hard, Misao-chan? Some tough warrior..."

"Ko~no... !" Forgetting her kimono, Misao attempted a Kecho Geri, only to end up sprawled on the kitchen floor, her kimono parted nearly to her waist. Sano leered and whistled appreciately... until a sweeping side-kick from Misao brought him down as well.

"What the heck are you two doing in here?" Yutarou peered into the kitchen, flanked by Ayame-chan and Suzume-chan. "Fighting again?"

"Mind your own business, rich boy," Sano said roughly as he and Misao rose to their feet, brushing themselves off.

"Sano-nii!" Ayame-chan scolded. "Don't be so mean to Yutarou-nii! He only asked you a question."

Misao couldn't help giggling at that. "She's right, Sano-nii," she said playfully. "You should be more polite to people... if you want them to be nice to you."

Sano smiled broadly as Misao punctuated her statement with fluttering lashes and a coy smile. "I'll remember that," he replied, winking at her. He then solemnly addressed Ayame-chan as he made his way toward the door --

"Gomen, Ayame-chan. I promise I won't tease your rich boyfriend anymore."

"Sano!" Misao groaned, shaking her head as she watched Sanosuke allow himself to be yanked outside and pummeled by the two embarrassed, furious children. Suzume-chan stood apart from the chaos, squealing with laughter. "Honto! Honto! Ayame-chan loves Yutarou-nii!" she shrieked delightedly.

"Suzume-chan!" Ayame-chan wailed. "You promised not to tell... !" She gasped, clasping her hands over her mouth in a vain attempt to take the words back. Yutarou stopped chewing on Sano's leg and stared at the mortified girl, his own face assuming the hue of Sano's headband. The grinning fighter was about to start harassing Yutarou again... but one look at Ayame-chan's brimming brown eyes killed the urge.

Before anyone had a chance to say anything else, Yutarou got up and walked over to the girl. "Don't cry, Ayame-chan," he said gently, pulling a handkerchief out of his shirt sleeve and holding it out to her. Ayame-chan looked at the ground, then back at Yutarou... then took the small square of fabric from him.

"Arigatou," she said in a barely audible voice, dabbing her eyes.

Misao smiled at the scene from her vantage point just inside the kitchen door. _Such a little gentleman... I can't blame Ayame-chan for having a crush on him._ She glowered at Sano as he re-entered the room. "You should be ashamed of yourself," she said. "Making a poor little girl cry."

"Che... that 'poor little girl' kicks almost as well as you do," Sano said ruefully, rubbing his shin. "You may want to consider her for the Oniwabanshuu when she gets older."

"I'm glad she got at least one good shot at you. You deserved it," Misao said firmly. "Now... as further punishment, you'll have to help me finish chopping all this stuff. Thanks to your mischief, dinner will be late enough as it is."

"Hai, hai," Sano grumbled, picking up a knife and allowing Misao to steer him to the counter.

.....

Crouched in the shadows on a nearby rooftop, Aoshi waited patiently for his target to emerge from the police building. Lt. Umari was scheduled to begin making his rounds soon... and part of those rounds included the same business district where the Akabeko was located. Even though the other two officers Saitou named also worked that area, the assignment coupled with Umari's glowing record had triggered Aoshi's suspicions. One of the first things he'd learned as an onmitsu was that people who seemed too good to be true... usually were.

Aoshi tensed as several officers left the police building. Umari was the last to emerge. After exchanging a few pleasantries with the others, the lieutenant headed down the street toward Aoshi. He allowed the officer to get about a building and a half away before following him, soundlessly leaping from one rooftop to the next, never losing sight of his quarry.

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"Oyasumi nasai, Misao-nee, Sano-nii!" Suzume-chan called as she and her older sister headed inside the clinic.

"Oyasumi, Suzume-chan... Ayame-chan," Misao replied, waving. Ayame-chan smiled and returned the wave before closing the door.

Misao sighed, absently smoothing the front of her kimono as she and Sano turned back toward the doujou. "I'm glad Ayame-chan isn't mad at you anymore," Misao said. "Of course, Yutarou may never speak to you again... not that that's a bad thing, since all you two do is fight, anyway..."

Sano didn't seem to hear her. "Ah.. chotto, Misao..." he began, clearing his throat.

"Nani?" She watched him through half-closed eyes, smiling slightly as he scratched the back of his head in that nervous, endearing way of his.

Sano stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jacket and scuffed the ground with the heel of his foot. _Why the hell am I so jittery all of a sudden? Chikusho..._

"I know it's late... but... would you like to take a walk with me?" he said in a rush.

His boyish uncertainty made Misao's heart melt. It was all she could do to keep from throwing her arms around him and shrieking, "Kawaii!" _I doubt he'd appreciate that..._

Instead, she gave him her most dazzling smile. "I'd love to," she said warmly.

Sano beamed as he took her arm, and together they headed in the direction of the Akabeko.

.....

Aoshi was beginning to wonder if he had chosen the right suspect. He had been following Umari for at least three hours, and the man had done nothing to indicate he was anything but a respectable police officer. He had broken up two street fights, chatted with a few shopkeepers lingering after-hours and reported in to his commander. None of the people he'd met with were in the least bit suspicious.

I should be patient... it's still early yet. He may make his move later on, when the streets have cleared out.

Aoshi slowly breathed the tension out of his body as he continued to shadow the lieutenant. His blue eyes narrowed as the officer suddenly froze in his tracks... then ducked into the nearest alley. _This could be it... though he's behaving strangely... almost as if he's hiding rather than meeting someone._

The onmitsu slowly moved further up the roof so as to get a better view of both the street and the alley. He could see two figures moving down the street in his direction. As they came closer, Aoshi began analyzing them. _A man and a woman... they appear to be a couple... could these two be the yakuza contacts? Or... perhaps it's just the man... and he's with a prostitute... it's certainly common enough among their kind --_

Aoshi's thought processes came to an abrupt halt as he recognized the approaching pair. These were no yakuza... and the woman certainly was no prostitute. The man was Sagara Sanosuke... and the woman whose arm was tucked comfortably in his was...

Misao...

It had been a few months since he had seen her, but Aoshi felt as if it may as well have been years. _Can she have grown __that__ tall in a few months? It doesn't seem possible... and her clothes... they're so... feminine._ Her kimono was perfectly appointed, its vivid blue sprinkled liberally with a delicate pattern of autumn leaves, and her obi echoed the red and gold of those leaves. Her hair was still braided, but the braid had been wound into a tidy bun held in place by a gold-and-enamel comb in the shape of a maple leaf.

She's become a woman... and a beauty at that. The thought made him feel... old.

Her bubbly laughter brought Aoshi out of his reverie. He watched as Misao spoke to Sagara, her radiant face tilted toward his. Aoshi couldn't make out the words, but whatever she said made both of them laugh. Sagara gave Misao's arm a squeeze, smiling as he said something to her in return. Aoshi's eyes narrowed to slits as he watched the ex-gangster gaze admiringly at Misao. Even at this distance, he could clearly read Sagara's strong feelings for her.

So... Saitou wasn't exaggerating. Sagara and Misao have become... close.

Despite the distraction the couple presented, Aoshi continued to keep an eye on Umari. The officer had flattened himself against the wall of the building across from Aoshi, remaining close enough to the street to be able to peer around the corner and observe the two in the street. Aoshi allowed himself a small, triumphant smile as he made the connection.

Naruhodo... the lieutenant is hiding from Sagara. He knows Sagara will recognize him as the officer from the first Akabeko robbery...

Aoshi began working his way toward the alley. All he needed now was a positive identification from Sagara and his first mission would be complete. _And I'll be one step closer to locating those scum daring to call themselves Oniwabanshuu..._

Before he could drop into the alley behind Umari, the man quickly darted back into the street. Aoshi looked over at Sagara, who had his back turned to Umari as he cupped Misao's chin in his hand. _Kuso... fine time for him to stop for a kiss... now Umari is getting away!_

Aoshi was halfway across the second building's roof before the thought caught up with him.

... fine time for him to stop for a kiss... with... Misao...

Gritting his teeth, Aoshi stepped up his pursuit of Umari, who had just started sprinting down the street.

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Just as Sano was about to kiss her, Misao heard a shuffling sound coming from about 20 feet away. _I was right... someone __was__ watching us... how creepy!_ She pulled back slightly from Sano, glancing over his shoulder at the figure that had just scurried out of a nearby alley.

"Doushita, Misao?" Sano asked.

"That guy... he was watching..." she said, pointing over his shoulder.

Sano's face darkened as he whirled around. "Oi!" he yelled. "You got

a problem, yarou?"

The fleeing man glanced reflexively over his shoulder... just long enough for Sanosuke to recognize his face. _Masaka... it's that bastard... what's his name.. Hiroshi! The one who played me for a fool!_

"Teme!" Sano roared, taking off after the officer. Misao called after him --

"Matte, Sano! It's not that important..." She sighed as he faded from view. _Great... he's going to get into a fight now... and with a police officer, no less. Saitou will __love__ this..._

She blinked, slowly fitting the pieces together. _Chotto... a police officer... Sano got so angry when he saw him... could it be that guy from the Akabeko?_

She kicked off her wooden sandals, picked them up and ran down the street as fast as her kimono would allow.

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Aoshi and Sanosuke both raced after Umari... Aoshi's silent, secret chase contrasting with Sano's loud curses and shouted threats. Sano quickly overtook the smaller man... but before the fighter could grab Umari, he abruptly skidded to a halt and drew his sword. Aoshi stopped and crouched down, watching as Sagara knocked his fists together in response to Umari's wordless challenge.

"You want a fight? I'll be happy to oblige you," Sanosuke snarled. "Hiroshi... or whatever the hell your name is... hope you're ready to get your ass kicked!"

Umari raised his sword. "Do you really think it's a good idea to attack me with your bare hands?" he said coldly. "Why don't you do us both a favor and get lost?"

With a furious yell, Sano charged the officer, who responded by dropping into a stance vaguely reminiscent of Saitou's Gatotsu. Aoshi swiftly drew his kodachi and prepared to leap to the ground... when his attention was distracted by a familiar battle cry --

"Kantatsu Tobi Kunai!"

Four small knives sailed through the air. One whistled past Sano's ear and embedded itself in the wall of a nearby building. Another just missed Umari's leg and skittered across the ground. The last two hit their targets... one slashing Umari's shoulder, the other splintering his wooden sword hilt right above where his hand gripped it. Umari cried out in pain, dropping his sword and clutching his injured shoulder.

"Now, Sano!" Misao shouted.

"Ooo~raaa!" Sanosuke roared, nailing Umari with a vicious uppercut. The blow lifted the officer off his feet and slammed him backward onto the ground, where he lay motionless.

Panting, Misao limped up to Sano. "Nicely done," she said with a

tired grin.

"I agree," a cool voice observed.

Startled, Sano and Misao turned to face the source of the voice... a tall, dark-haired man dressed in a blue-black uniform similar to the one Misao often wore. Sanosuke glanced anxiously at Misao, whose mouth hung open as she stared at her okashira... the man whose face still haunted her dreams... and whom she thought she might never see again.

Aoshi... sama...

-- End of Chapter 9 --

10. These Changing Times

RK Fanfic: These Changing Times (Chapter 10)

****Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic: These Changing Times****

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^_^;;

****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://www2.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****Chapter 10 -- Cat and Mouse****

Aoshi... sama...

Misao had never understood the concept of one's mind going blank until that moment. She couldn't think, couldn't speak... couldn't feel anything. All she could do was stand and stare.

Sanosuke watched Misao closely. Her face had gone pale, her eyes dark with disbelief and pain as she gazed at her okashira... who wore that same infuriatingly emotionless expression that always made Sano want to smack him. _Che, the man can't be human... how can he look at her like he just saw her yesterday when they've been apart for weeks?_

Surprisingly, Aoshi was the first break the silence. "Sagara... do you mind taking care of that?" he said, gesturing to Umari's prone figure.

Sanosuke looked at Misao. She had jumped slightly when Aoshi spoke, but it seemed to have brought her out of her trance. She met Sanosuke's eyes... and he was relieved to see hers clear a bit. "Do you need help, Sano?" she asked, her voice shaking slightly. "We don't have any rope..."

"Don't need any... thanks anyway," he said, hefting Umari over his shoulder like a sack of grain. "I think I can handle this one little guy." Sano then addressed Aoshi, taking care to keep his tone casual. "I take it Saitou called you in on this, Shinomori?"

"Aa."

He's as talkative as ever, Sano thought wryly. "So I guess we're taking him to the wolf," he said. "Let's go."

Aoshi turned to Misao as they began walking toward police headquarters. "Thank you for your assistance, Misao," he said. "Your aim has improved considerably... that strike to Umari's sword was at an awkward angle, yet you hit it perfectly. Well done."

Misao flushed as the feelings of anger, humiliation and sorrow she'd been holding back flooded her. Aoshi's words of praise carried a hint of condescension -- like a master complimenting a mediocre student who performs beyond everyone's modest expectations. She looked down at the ground and closed her eyes, breathing deeply. Yamete. I can't fall apart... not now, in front of him. Later... when I'm alone... I can feel and think and cry.

She opened her eyes and met Aoshi's directly. "Arigatou, Aoshi-sama," she said, matching his impassive tone. "Kedo... two of my four kunai missed their targets. I'll have to practice harder tomorrow."

Sanosuke looked over his shoulder at Misao. Her eyes were blank, her face expressionless, save for the trace of a blush on her cheeks. His heart ached for her, that she should feel the need to hide herself so completely. Oh, Misao... what I wouldn't give for you to get over him... to be yourself again... the way you've been these past few days.

They were all silent for the rest of the walk. As they approached the police building, Aoshi addressed Misao again --

"Misao... you should probably return to Kamiya Doujou. It's late, and this will take awhile."

Before Misao could protest, Sano angrily interjected, "Chotto! If it weren't for Misao, we wouldn't even be here with this guy right now. She has the right to stay if she wants."

Aoshi merely raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to stay?" he asked Misao.

She considered the comfort of her futon and her need for a good cry. Then she looked at Sano, and his encouraging eyes made up her mind. "I do," she said firmly.

Aoshi nodded, and the three entered the building with their

prisoner.

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"Please forgive me!" The silk merchant fell forward, groveling before the masked figures that had stormed into his office. His bookkeeper lay unconscious on the floor, bleeding profusely from several deep sword wounds. "I know the payment is late... one of my shipments was delayed... my business has suffered... you have to understand! I'll get you the money! I just need time..."

The leader of the masked men stepped slowly forward, his two swords dripping blood. His voice was as sharp and cold as the blades he wielded. "I don't recall extensions being part of the deal we made," he said. "You're paying the Oniwabanshuu for protection, remember? You miss a payment... your protection runs out."

The man looked up, trembling uncontrollably as he watched the masked leader approach him. "I beg you! I have a wife... children... have mercy!"

The leader's eyes glittered as he raised his swords...

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Saitou took another drag from his cigarette, absently flicking ash onto the floor of the interrogation room where they had brought Umari. The officer was tied to a chair in the center of the windowless room. Saitou stood directly facing him, while Sanosuke and Aoshi stood on either side... Sano shifting restlessly from foot to foot, while Aoshi stood quietly near the door, his back almost touching the wall.

Misao remained behind Umari, standing silently in a shadowed corner. She and Sanosuke had argued fiercely with Saitou to earn her the right to stay for the questioning... and Aoshi had surprised her by intervening on her behalf --

"As you reminded me earlier, Saitou, Misao is Oniwabanshuu... and since she's the only onmitsu I have in Tokyo right now, I may call upon her again to assist me in this case. I'd prefer if she stayed."

Saitou had glowered at Misao for a second, then exhaled sharply. "Fine. But keep to the shadows and stay quiet," he said to Misao, gesturing to a corner behind the unconscious Umari. She suppressed the urge to gloat and merely nodded, taking her position without another word.

As Umari came to with a groan, Saitou tensed, dropping his cigarette to the floor and crushing it under his heel as he strode forward. "Umari... can you hear me?" he said sharply.

Umari shook his head slightly, opening his eyes. They widened as he recognized Saitou. "Fujita-san!" he exclaimed, trying to stand. "Where... who... why am I tied up, sir?"

Saitou folded his arms. "Don't play innocent, Umari... I don't have the patience for it," he said, staring coldly at the prisoner. "You

know very well why you're here and why you've been... restrained." Saitou's eyes assumed a feral gleam. "Now, allow me to ask you a few questions... such as why you failed to inform me of the first attempted robbery at the Akabeko last month."

Umari looked shocked. "Attempted... robbery? Last month? Sumanu, Fujita-san... I have no idea what you mean."

"Oh? That's interesting... considering I have a witness here that says otherwise." Saitou turned to Sanosuke. "Sagara... is this not the officer that took your report that night?"

Sanosuke clenched his fists and stepped forward. "Yeah, it's him," he said, scowling at Umari. "That's why he ran like a coward when I recognized him tonight."

Umari blinked, looking genuinely puzzled. "I'm sorry, mister, but I don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about," he said. "I've never seen you before tonight, when you started chasing me and yelling threats because I just happened to see you kissing your girlfriend."

"Teme!" Sano snarled, tightening his fists. "You're just stalling now. Admit it -- you were the one who took my report... told me you'd pass it on to Sai- I mean, Fujita... and did nothing. You can't deny it!"

Umari shrugged. "There's nothing to deny," he said. "You're simply mistaken. I understand how it could happen... it was late, you probably had been drinking... it was probably dark in the restaurant. I have no doubt that someone took a report from you, but it wasn't me."

"Liar!" Sano shouted. Before he could continue his tirade, Saitou interrupted him --

"Can you prove this?" Saitou said, his eyes never leaving Umari's face. _This bastard must have incredible self-control to be so bold and confident in his lies. Or else a strong alibi._ "Can you vouch for your whereabouts at about 2 a.m. on August 25?"

Umari nodded emphatically. "I'd have to check my report from that night... but I'm almost certain I was taking a statement from the proprietor of the Kaiko-ya at that time," he said. "He suspected one of his workers of stealing from him, and he summoned me while I was making my rounds that night."

Misao hardly dared to breathe as she puzzled over the conversation. _I never thought I'd live to see Saitou so upset! Demo... there's no way Sano can be mistaken about Umari. Sano's not stupid, no matter what Saitou says about him... and he talked to the guy for long enough to remember what he looks like._

Saitou's face turned to stone. "I remember the report on that incident," he said in a tight voice. "I'll look it up myself right now. If you'll excuse me..."

"Forgive my interruption, Fujita-san... but you should probably save yourself the trouble," Aoshi said. "If you remember the incident Umari is referring to, our questioning him further is a waste of his

time and ours. We should let him go."

Sanosuke began sputtering a protest, but Saitou cut him off with a wave of his gloved hand. The police inspector then stared at Aoshi as if the onmitsu had just gone stark, raving mad. "And just where," Saitou said through clenched teeth, "am I supposed to let him go to, Shinomori?"

"Send him back to his post," Aoshi said calmly. "We were obviously mistaken." He then turned to Umari. "Gomen nasai, Umari-san. I am sure you will be compensated for any injuries you incurred, as well as the time you spent being interrogated."

Sanosuke growled something unintelligible, but held his tongue as he watched Saitou grind his teeth. _All right... I'll keep quiet for now, since this is Saitou's turf... but where does Shinomori get off?_

Umari's face assumed a look of indignant triumph. Before he could speak, however, Aoshi continued --

"However, I'm sure Fujita-san can assure you your time and trouble here will not go unrecognized. When word gets out that you spent 2 hours here answering questions about the robberies, the real go-between may become nervous and expose himself. In that event, you'll be given the credit you deserve for assisting in that inevitable arrest."

Umari's face paled. "What... what do you mean... 'when word gets out?' " he inquired nervously.

Aoshi wore his usual detached expression, but Misao recognized the glint in his cool blue eyes. _Naruhodo! He's using the threat of retaliation by the yakuza to push Umari into revealing himself._

Misao then glanced over at Saitou, who, despite his outward expression of barely suppressed rage, had the same glint in his narrowed amber eyes. _And Saitou knows what Aoshi-sama is up to... much as I hate to admit it, these two __are__ the best..._

"Well, Umari-san... I'm afraid a few people saw us bring you in," Aoshi said politely. "I'm sure everything will be straightened out as far as your innocence is concerned, but there's bound to be some talk in the meantime... and we'll be sure to use that to our benefit to try to flush out the real traitor."

Umari was visibly sweating. Sanosuke had now caught on to the play being staged for Umari's benefit and had to bite his lip to keep from saying anything. _What if he doesn't crack? Umari will walk out of here a free man... and we'll have to start from nothing again!_

Aoshi walked over to Umari and untied the ropes that bound him to the chair. He stood back, allowing Umari to rise, rubbing his bandaged shoulder absently. "You're free to go, Umari-san," Aoshi said. "We'll be keeping in close touch with you. Please inform us if you should see anything strange while on the rest of your rounds tonight."

Umari swallowed heavily as he gazed sightlessly toward the open doorway. Then, trembling slightly, he threw himself down on his hands and knees in front of Aoshi.

"N- no! Please don't make me go out there!" he cried. "They'll... they'll kill me!"

Aoshi regarded Umari silently. The officer raised his terrified face beseechingly. "All right! I admit it! I'm the contact... I buried those robbery reports... covered up the thefts... I'll tell you everything! But... but you have to promise to protect me! Better to go to jail than to face that madman!"

Saitou yanked Umari up by the back of his shirt. "You may wish you chose otherwise after I'm through with you, uragirimono," he said icily, pushing Umari back into the chair. "Now start talking."

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Where the hell is Umari? The leader of the thieves clenched his jaw as he sped through the night, keeping to shadows and rooftops as best he could to avoid his pursuers. He had ordered his people to scatter the minute the police showed up, drawing their attention so that they chased him alone. _That worthless cop was supposed to keep everyone away from this neighborhood tonight! When I get my hands on him..._

A shrill whistle pierced the night air. "This way, men!" an officer shouted. "I saw him duck down an alley over there!"

Cursing under his breath, the leader changed his direction and headed for the nearest canal. _I'll lose them in the water... it may take an hour or so, but they'll never catch me there._

As he emerged from the alleyway, he took a deep breath and jumped into the canal. His final thought before hitting the water was
--

Umari... you're a dead man!

.....

"That's it?" Saitou raised his head from the papers on which he had Umari write out his confession. "That's everything you know about your contact?"

Umari nodded vigorously. "That's all I know, I swear! This guy was really careful... he never made first contact with me, it was always some random bystander who would pass me a note telling me to meet him in an alley or an abandoned shack or something. That way, he could show up in his dark clothes and mask and not be noticed by anybody. I never even saw the color of his eyes." He shivered. "I'll tell you this... I'll never forget his voice. Cold as ice and deadly as a knife... just remembering it gives me the chills. And I heard things about him... that he was ruthless to the point of cruelty. The things he did to people who crossed him... I didn't think that kind of bloodlust still existed in Meiji."

Aoshi finished skimming the papers Saitou had handed him and said,

"You're sure this man referred to himself as Oniwabanshuu? Did he give any other name or title?"

"The only title I ever heard him use was okashira of the Oniwabanshuu," Umari said. "Hmph... didn't know those relics still existed. I thought they had all committed suicide or ran away after the wars like the whipped dogs they were. And now they're petty thieves... they never did have any honor..."

Misao clenched her teeth in rage. _Sono uragirimono! How __dare__ he?_ She stormed out of her dark corner to berate the prisoner, but before she could even get his attention --

thwack

Misao and Sano gaped as they watched Aoshi punch Umari in the face. He stood over the shocked officer, face suffused with anger, shouting --

"Urusai! You dare presume to judge others... you, who have betrayed all sides! A traitor like you knows nothing of honor!"

Misao put her hand up to her open mouth. _Now I understand why Aoshi-sama is here... to clear the Oniwabanshuu name._ She narrowed her eyes, hating herself for indulging in the same old frustrated thoughts.

You and your damned honor... it's all you care about... the only thing that rouses your emotions... baka-yarou!

As Aoshi glared at Umari, he crouched in his chair, shouting, "Fujita-san! I thought you said you would protect me!"

Saitou slowly exhaled smoke through his nose. "I said I would protect you from the yakuza," he said, looking amused. "Nothing more."

Sano sniggered. Aoshi lowered his hand, his face settling back into its usual sedate mask. He turned abruptly and said to Saitou --

"Unless you have further need of us, Fujita... I think it's best we leave now."

Saitou nodded. "We can go over all this tomorrow morning," he said. "I'll see you at about 11, Shinomori."

"Yoshi," Sano chimed in. "We'll see you then."

Saitou stared stonily at Sanosuke. "Who said you were invited, rooster-head?" he asked rhetorically.

"I did!" Sano growled, advancing a step toward the inspector. "I'm part of this, too, whether you like it or not!"

Saitou smiled mockingly. "On the contrary," he said smoothly, "you've already given me all the information you have on this case, which means you're of no further use. Go back to your street fights and leave the investigating to professionals like Shinomori and me."

"Kisama!" Sano roared, taking a wild swing at Saitou, who dodged it easily.

"Ahou," Saitou said smugly. "Try that again and I'll make sure you share a cell with the uragirimono tonight."

Sano flexed his fingers and grinned wickedly. "That a promise?" he said. "It'll give me a chance to settle with both of you in one night."

Misao reached the end of her patience. She stomped up to Sano, grabbed him by the arm, pulled him around to face her and yelled --

"Sano no baka!"

All the cockiness faded from Sano's face, which assumed a put-upon expression. "What'd I do?" he protested. "You heard him... he was asking for it!"

"I don't care!" Misao shot back. "I've had it with all this macho posturing... we've caught our man, so let's leave it at that and get the hell out of here!"

Sanosuke felt a surge of anger as he glared down at his furious friend. "Fine," he hissed, shooting a deadly look at Saitou. "This isn't over, Miburo... not by a long shot."

Saitou smirked as he watched Misao drag Sanosuke out the door. "You see what I mean, Shinomori?" he said, taking a leisurely drag. "Your little weasel has that chicken by his tail-feathers. Quite amusing, ne?"

Aoshi didn't reply. "I can be reached at the Midori-ya if you need me," he said as he walked out the door.

Saitou smiled broadly. "Very amusing indeed," he said as he yanked Umari out of his chair and dragged him toward the holding cells.

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Sano stewed silently as he and Misao headed toward Kamiya Doujou. She was walking apart from him, refusing to even look at him or acknowledge his presence. _Che... you would think from the way she's acting that I'd murdered someone..._

"Come on, Misao," he grumbled. "I know I was acting like an idiot, okay? But I think I have the right to be pissed, dammit!"

Without looking at him, Misao replied, "I know you do. But Sano, sometimes it's better to walk away and resume the fight later. Saitou has every right to include or exclude whoever he wants from this investigation... it wasn't exactly the right time or place to question him."

Furious, Sanosuke reached over and grabbed Misao by the shoulders, turning her to face him. "So it's okay with you that Saitou is shutting us out of everything now... after all we've done for him?" he whispered fiercely. "What the hell is the matter with you, Misao?"

You never would have let him get away with that a few days ago!"

Misao looked away from him, her face unreadable. Something occurred to Sano in that moment. "Now I get it," he said, his voice rising. "It's all because of Shinomori, isn't it? That's why you're backing off. What, now that your boss is back in town you're going to become his little lapdog again?"

A white-hot rage exploded behind Misao's eyes. Without thinking, she slapped Sano's face as hard she could. The sharp smack seemed to echo endlessly down the empty street as the shocked fighter stared at her. Neither of them said anything for a full minute.

Then Misao slowly backed out of Sano's grasp. "Gomen... gomen nasai, Sano," she said shakily. "I don't know... what came over me... I shouldn't have..."

Sano took a step toward her. "Iie... I deserved it," he said, his eyes dark with regret. "I had no right to say what I did... I know Shinomori is your okashira, and that you have to show him respect. What I said was rude and demeaning to you."

He reached out to her. "Please forgive me, Misao, for behaving like such a mouthy, selfish baka-yarou tonight," he said.

Misao stared at his hand, which seemed to shimmer and blur. _No... not yet... mustn't yet..._ "I accept your apology," she whispered, her head bowed, eyes shut tight against the threatening tears.

She gasped slightly as she felt Sano cup her chin in his hand and raise her face to his. "Misao," he said gently. "Look at me."

Misao shook her head. "Please... don't..." she whimpered. "Just take me home..."

She felt his fingertips brush her eyelids. "I can't do that," he said. "Misao... you can trust me... please tell me what's hurting you so much. Is it what I said before?"

Misao sniffled and finally opened her eyes. To her relief, only a few tears escaped. "No... it's my ankle," she said thickly. "I must have overused it tonight... it's really throbbing now. It's hard to walk on it."

Sano knew she was lying, and that he should probably drop the subject. Still, there was one other thing he could offer her. He moved to stand beside her, putting his arm around her waist, and said solemnly --

"Then lean on me."

Misao couldn't explain what it was that finally broke her down... the empathy in his eyes... his strong arm supporting her... the double-meaning in what he said to her. Whatever it was, she found herself turning to Sano and burying her face in his jacket, unable to contain her sorrow any longer. As she sobbed, she felt Sano wrap his arms around her securely and press his lips to the top of her head. He spoke into her hair --

"That's it, Misao... let it all out... cry all you want. I'm not going anywhere..."

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Genzai-sensei bid the guard outside the clinic good-night as he locked the front door from the inside. _Ahh... another long day... it will feel good to get into bed!_

As he paused outside Tae's room to look in on her once more, he heard a clattering, rattling sound outside. The sound seemed to grow louder, as if it was approaching from a distance. _Nani? That sounds like..._

The doctor hurried back to the front door, hastily unlocking it and stepping outside. As he suspected, the noise was coming from a horse-drawn carriage pulling up to the clinic. His face lit up as he recognized the face peering out of the carriage window.

"Megumi-san!" Genzai-sensei cried. "What a pleasant surprise this is! I didn't expect you for another two days at least!"

The driver swung open the door and helped Megumi out of the carriage. The dark-haired woman beamed at her old colleague. "Genzai-sensei... it's so good to see you again!" she said, clasping his outstretched hands. "I apologize for our late arrival... and the carriage... but Tatsuya-san was eager to get here before we got sidetracked again."

As she spoke, a short man with light brown hair stepped out of the carriage. He bowed respectfully to the older man. "Pardon our intrusion," he said. "I am Wakamatsu Tatsuya."

Genzai-sensei bowed in return. "And I'm Genzai-sensei," he said, studying the man standing before him. _Hmm... younger than I expected... handsome, too._ He glanced at Megumi speculatively. _Interesting..._

"Well, now that pleasantries are out of the way... let's get you two settled," the old doctor said cheerfully. "Follow me..."

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Unmei shuffled restlessly around the lantern-lit practice yard, tapping her cane impatiently. _I can't believe this! What a complete disaster! Where the hell is that idiot grandson of mine? He has much to answer for tonight!_

Her eyes snapped fire as she detected a dripping, squishing sound behind her. Whirling around, she confronted the dark-clad, sopping-wet masked figure that had just dropped over the doujou fence. She hissed --

"Where the hell have you been?"

The figure tore his mask off and shook out his soaked black hair...

"Don't ask," Toushi grimaced. "What a lousy night..."

"That's the understatement of the year!" Unmei screeched. "Do you have any idea how badly you fouled things up tonight? One of our men was caught by the police that raided the Kaiko-ya! Once that bastard Saitou gets his hands on him, it's all over for us!"

Toushi's eyes flashed. "He won't talk... he'll die before he reveals anything," he said confidently. "I'll make sure of that."

"Oh, will you?" Unmei shook her head in disgust. "You're too confident, boy. You have no idea what Saitou is capable of... he was one of the Shinsen Gumi's best. Mibu's Wolf is a cunning, ruthless man... he'll use any means necessary to get his answers. And he's not some weak, witless rookie you can outsmart or sneak past."

Toushi glowered at his grandmother. "Then I'll send one of our contacts within the police to do the job," he said. "That scum-sucking coward Umari owes me big-time... he didn't hold off his police buddies tonight like he was supposed to, which is why the police broke up our visit to the Kaiko-ya."

A tentative voice interrupted them --

"Toushi-sama? I have news."

Toushi turned to face the masked onmitsu standing in the shadows of the practice yard. "What is it, Kazuo?" he said shortly.

The man bowed. "Umari has been caught, okashira," he said. "I saw him being brought into police headquarters by the ex-gangster known as Zanza."

Unmei clenched her jaw as Toushi blurted, "You mean Sagara Sanosuke? That interfering oaf... we should have disposed of him when we had the chance."

"Silence, Toushi," Unmei snapped. "Is there more, Kazuo?"

"Hai, Unmei-sama," Kazuo said, his voice pleased. "There were two other people with Zanza. One was your pupil, Makimachi Misao... and the other was that man you've been waiting for. The Oniwabanshuu's okashira."

Unmei gasped. "Shinomori Aoshi," she said, clasping her hands. "Are you sure?"

"Hai, Unmei-sama... I am certain. His description matches the one you gave me," Kazuo said.

Unmei looked delighted. "Well, Toushi... it looks like we won't need much more time after all," she said, cackling. "The final act is about to begin."

-- End of Chapter 10 --

11. These Changing Times

****Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic: These Changing Times****

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^_^;;

****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://www2.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****SPOILER WARNING:**** This chapter contains some Kyoto Arc spoilers; if you've at least watched up through episode 42 of the anime (or read through Vol. 11 of the manga), you should be fine. If not, proceed at your own risk.

****Chapter 11 -- One Chance****

"That's it, Misao... let it all out... cry all you want. I'm not going anywhere..."

Misao took Sano at his word. She cried for what seemed like hours, determined to drain every last bit of sorrow, every last teardrop. A detached part of her was amazed by Sano's unusually patient attitude. He held her tightly, wordlessly, stroking her hair every now and then. A couple of times she thought she heard him sigh, but she was too miserable to care whether it was from exasperation.

Finally, her sobs faded to an occasional snuffle. Still, she remained in Sano's embrace, her face pressed against his chest, too embarrassed to look at him. _He smells good... like wood-chips._ She smiled, remembering how she'd sweet-talked him into cutting up enough wood for breakfast before they left the doujou that night.

Sanosuke was relieved that Misao appeared to be finished crying. Her sorrow tore at his heart, her tears affecting him in a way no other woman's ever had. _What is it about her... why does she get to me like this?_ It had been hard to just stand there holding her when he wanted so badly to say or do something that would make things right for her.

Ore no baka-yarou... there's nothing I can do or say to change what happened... I should know that better than anybody. I can only help comfort her now... and hope that she finally moves past this.

"Misao?"

"Hai?" Her voice was muffled by his jacket.

"Are you ready to talk about what happened now?"

Startled, Misao looked up at him. "Eeto..." she faltered, rubbing her eyes with the back of one hand.

Sano offered her his sleeve. She blushed, shaking her head. "I think I've soaked your jacket enough for one night," she said ruefully, eliciting a brief chuckle from him.

"You didn't answer my question," he said, tipping her face upward so she couldn't avoid his eyes. "When are you going to tell me what happened between you and Shinomori?"

Misao gritted her teeth as she felt her eyes grow hot again. _Chikusho... will I ever be able to hear his name again and not feel like I've been stabbed through the heart? I'm such a weakling!_

"Misao... you can't keep holding this inside... it's eating you up." Sano's voice deepened with emotion. "It hurts me to see you suffer like this." He cradled Misao's face in his hands, brushing away the remnants of her tears with his thumbs. "You can trust me," he said. "I promise I won't judge or criticize you... I'll just listen. Please tell me."

The tenderness with which he was treating her made Misao feel warm and protected. "All right," she said. "But not here... let's go back to the doujou."

Sano nodded, offering his arm as support. She took it, and together they slowly made their way down the street.

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Misao grimaced as she lowered her swollen ankle into the bucket of water Sano had brought from the well. "Tsumetai," she said, shivering.

"It'll help the swelling," Sano said, plopping down next to her on the steps to the doujou training hall. "I'm ready when you are."

Misao took a deep breath. "I guess I should start by telling you where things stood between Aoshi-sama and me when we returned to Kyoto two years ago," she said.

"I've been curious about that," Sano said. "You seemed pretty cozy at the wedding... I remember thinking that you were starting to wear old frosty down."

Misao snickered, then covered her mouth. _I actually laughed at that! Maybe there's hope for me after all..._ "I thought so, too," she said, her voice growing soft and reflective. "But things remained pretty much the same for the next year. I stopped trailing after him so much... thought maybe if I made less of a nuisance of myself he would seek me out more." Her eyes flashed bitterly. "Of course, he didn't. Not that he ignored me, either... he just went about his business as always and only included me when necessary."

[illegible]

"Of course, Jiya!" Misao put down the beautiful kimono she was gazing at. Her Aoiya family had really outdone themselves for her birthday this year, she thought, glancing at the piles of clothes surrounding her. _Most likely because I've outgrown everything else I own... guess they were sick of seeing me in Omasu's old pink kimono every day!_

"Iie, Misao. This present isn't from me," Okina said, his tone matching his intensely serious expression.

"It's from your grandfather."

Okina sipped his tea, then put the cup down. "When your grandfather -- our okashira -- was on his deathbed all those years ago, I made him a promise... that, when you were of age, I would give you his greatest treasure. His legacy, I suppose you could call it." He gravely handed her the bundle.

"Aa," Okina agreed, a slight smile lightening his severe expression. "It used to have a twin... I'm not exactly sure what happened to it. They were gifts from the emperor. Many times I had the privilege of watching Akihito-sama wield both in battle. While he lived, he was the sole master of Kodachi Nitou Ryuu... and I've yet to see anyone surpass him."

Okina chuckled. "Well... Aoshi-sama is certainly his mentor's equal," he said, stroking his beard. "But better than Akihito-sama? It's hard for me to say."

His eyes grew serious again. "Misao... you know I never wanted you to join the Oniwabanshuu." Her face fell, and she opened her mouth to protest, but Okina held his hand up. "I know you think you've heard this all before... but humor an old man. When the battle at Toba Fushimi ended and Meiji was established, I rejoiced not only for Japan, but for you... because you would be able to live peacefully in a world free of the strife and chaos that had ended your parents' lives... and, indirectly, your grandfather's. To that end, I was happy when the Oniwabanshuu disbanded... after all, I felt there would be no need for such a group in the new era."

Misao watched Okina silently, biting her lip to keep from interrupting him. _Oh, Jiya... I can see where this is going. How many times have we had this argument? Do you really think you'll ever change my mind?_

Okina frowned as he continued, "I know now I was being overly optimistic... perhaps even foolish. One thing the events of the past two years have shown me is that there will always be a need for the Oniwabanshuu. It is as Himura says... the weak still need protection from those who would abuse them. And I think we have protected Kyoto well these past few years."

Misao grinned. "I agree," she said with her trademark cockiness.

Okina tried to resist smiling in return. He failed. "You have a right to be proud... you've become a fine onmitsu, despite my misgivings," he said. His smile faded. "Still, I often wonder if Akihito-sama were living today... if he would have wanted you to become Oniwabanshuu. I think he would have preferred for you to have a normal life... a husband, children... far away from the violence and darkness onmitsu often face."

Misao could no longer hold her tongue. "I know you worry about me, Jiya," she said. "But despite all your dreams and wishes for me... I am Oniwabanshuu. I can be nothing else."

Okina's eyes grew moist. "I know that now," he said. "And I know how serious you are about your training and your place among us. I've watched you these past few years... you've grown from a well-meaning but headstrong child playing fighting-games to a strong, skillful warrior who chooses her actions carefully." His eyes twinkled mischievously. "Well... most of the time, anyway. But what I mean to say is... I am very proud of you. And I accept how you've chosen to live your life."

Misao set aside her grandfather's kodachi and threw her arms around Okina. "Arigatou, Jiya," she said, smiling joyfully. "That's the best gift I've gotten yet."

Okina hugged her tightly. "My dear Misao," he said warmly. "Your grandfather would be every bit as proud of you as I am."

Misao beamed as she released Okina and picked up the kodachi, pulling it from its iron sheath and gingerly pressing her thumb to its edge. "Hmm... it's dull," she said. "I'll have to sharpen it later. Jiya, can you teach me use it?"

"I'm afraid not," Okina sighed. "I was never much good at swordplay."

You'll have to find another teacher."

Misao's eyes gleamed. "I know just the person..." she said cheerfully, sheathing the kodachi and scrambling to her feet.

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"Absolutely not," Aoshi said firmly, rising from his seat on the porch.

Misao had expected him to refuse her request, so she was prepared to counter his objections. "Why not?" She jumped up after him, blocking his path. "Aoshi-sama, you're a Nitou Ryu master! You're the only one who can show me how to properly use..."

"I said no." His voice matched his frosty blue eyes. "End of discussion."

Misao's cheeks burned with anger. Despite her vow to control herself and win Aoshi over with calm reason, she lost her temper. "I think you owe me more of an explanation than that," she snapped. "After all, I am okashira of the Oniwabanshuu --"

Aoshi's eyes glinted dangerously. "Oh really?" he said quietly. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that, Misao. Now may be a good time."

Misao trembled a little. In the year since Aoshi's return, they had never discussed her assumption of his title. And she certainly hadn't intended to bring such a sensitive topic up now, in such a childish, taunting way. _So much for tact... now I've really upset him! And rightfully so,_ she thought, mentally smacking herself. She supposed her chances of getting him to train her had gone from slim to nonexistent.

Oh well... time for damage control. She would do well to get out of this conversation with her title of okashira intact... much less soothe Aoshi's bruised feelings.

She held her head high, doing her best to sound calm and confident. "All right," she said. "It is about time we dealt with this. Shall we call the others?"

"That won't be necessary," Aoshi said. "This is a matter between you and me. We should resolve it privately." He turned and walked toward the Oniwabanshuu living quarters, motioning for Misao to follow. She swallowed nervously, falling in silently behind him, her thoughts racing.

It could be worse... he could've challenged me to combat for the title. Or... maybe he is going to challenge me! Like I would ever have a prayer of defeating him... but I can't just give up! I am the granddaughter of Makimachi Akihito... one of the founding members of the Oniwabanshuu and one of its greatest warriors... to honor my family, I have to at least try to prove my worthiness as okashira!

Aoshi slid open the door to his room and waited for Misao to enter first. He had regained his cool composure, making it impossible for

Misao to tell whether he was still angry with her. She walked through the doorway, her eyes downcast, her heart beating in her throat.

After Aoshi set out mats for both of them, they sat quietly for several minutes. Misao stared at her hands, which were clutched tightly in her lap. After awhile, she stole a glance at Aoshi, and saw he was sitting with eyes closed and a peaceful expression on his face.

So he's meditating... guess he was still upset, then. Should I start the conversation?

Aoshi opened his eyes as she finished that last thought. They were calm and clear, and for a moment Misao thought she saw something like tenderness in his expression. But it vanished the moment he began to speak.

"Misao," he said sternly, "tell me again how you became okashira of the Oniwabanshuu."

Her mouth went dry. "Where... where would you like me to start?" she said softly, unwilling to cause either of them further suffering by bringing up painful memories.

"From the beginning, of course," Aoshi said.

She groaned. "That doesn't help me," she said, gesturing in frustration. "Which beginning? The time when you and Hannya and everyone left me? The time when I went to look for you? The time when I first met Himura?"

Aoshi regarded her calmly. "Start with meeting Himura Battousai," he said.

Misao ground her teeth. "I wish you'd stop calling him that! He gave all that up, remember?"

Aoshi didn't reply. Misao sighed and began recounting her first meeting with Himura Kenshin. Once she had started her tale, she relaxed and began to enjoy describing her journey with Kenshin and all that had followed after they reached the Aoiya. She grew increasingly more animated... until she reached the part where Kaoru and Yahiko told her of her friends' deaths and Aoshi's vow to kill Kenshin. Her voice faltered, and she stopped speaking.

Aoshi's voice was cool and smooth as glass. "Go on, Misao," he said. "What happened then?"

She closed her eyes. "I can't," she murmured, trying to hold back the tears gathering behind her eyelids as she recalled her frantic race back to the Aoiya, then to the storage shed on the hill... and the brutal sight that awaited her there. Her beloved Jiya, cut to shreds... her beloved Aoshi standing over him, his kodachi dripping with Jiya's blood...

"Misao. Open your eyes."

She obeyed instantly, her tears evaporating as she met Aoshi's gaze. His normally blank eyes were filled with pain and regret. Even his

voice was different... hoarse, less certain. "I just realized I never apologized for what I said to you that day... or for everything I did that hurt you during those weeks," he said. "I thought words of apology seemed weak and inadequate in the face of my actions... but..."

Misao shook her head. "Iie, Aoshi-sama... words were never necessary," she said. "We all knew how truly sorry you were... and that it was hard for you to say so. After you returned to us, your actions told us what was in your heart... as they always have."

Aoshi looked faintly surprised, and for a moment Misao thought she could see the hint of a smile hovering around his lips. It quickly disappeared as he resumed his calm countenance.

"Misao, all the events that caused you to take up the burden of leading the Oniwabanshuu... at the time, it was necessary and the right thing to do," he said in his usual impassive voice. "However, it's no longer necessary for you to bear the weight of such responsibility." His eyes flashed as she started to protest, intimidating her into silence. "Your abilities have grown, but you still have much to learn about strategy and leadership," Aoshi continued. "And you are still very young. Misao, you're capable of being a sensible girl... when you think about it, you have to admit that you're not ready yet."

Misao clenched her fists in her lap, bowing her head. "I know that," she said through clenched teeth, looking up anxiously. "I admit it. Datte, Aoshi-sama --"

Aoshi cut her off. "That is why I'm asking you to let me bear this burden for you," he said, "until the day you're truly ready to take your place as okashira."

Misao gaped at him. _He's... asking... for __my__ permission to resume his title? He can't be serious..._

They stared at each other without speaking for awhile. Then it hit Misao --

Naruhodo! This is his way of apologizing to me! He's letting me step aside without losing face... yet acknowledging that my place within the Oniwabanshuu is secure... now and in the future.

"I accept your offer, Aoshi-sama," she said, bowing slightly. When she looked up she was rewarded with a rare sight.

Aoshi was smiling at her. By normal standards, it was no more than a slight upward quirk of his mouth's corners... but for Aoshi, it was as dramatic as a full-blown grin.

"Arigatou gozaimasu," he said, bowing in return. "I promise that this time I will serve the Oniwabanshuu faithfully and honorably."

Misao held up her hand. "I do have one condition, though." She nearly giggled as Aoshi's smile vanished. "If I'm ever to become okashira, I'll need to master all the onmitsu arts. Will you reconsider your refusal to teach me Kodachi Nitou Ryuu?"

Aoshi nodded. "Shikashi... first you have to become stronger at your other skills. Your kempo especially needs some work... we can begin there tomorrow," he said. "It's late... you should get to bed."

Misao could no longer suppress her own wide grin. "Yoshi," she said, smacking her fist into her palm and rising to leave. She paused at the door, turning to face him once more. "Ne, Aoshi-sama... how will I know when I'm ready to become okashira?"

Aoshi's eyes took on a decidedly devilish gleam. "It's very simple, Misao," he said evenly. "You'll be ready to become okashira... when you can defeat me in combat."

Misao wailed, "Defeat you? Mou! I'll be older than Jiya by that time!"

"Maybe so... but I'll be even older than that. That should give you the advantage."

Misao stared at Aoshi, dumbfounded and delighted. _Unbelievable... first a smile... now he's actually __teasing__ me! What's next -- pulling pranks and singing sake songs with Jiya?_

"I think you should get some sleep, too... you're acting weird," she said with a wink. "Oyasumi, Aoshi-sama. I'll be ready for training when you return from the temple tomorrow morning."

"I'll be expecting you," he said. "Oyasumi, Misao."

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"I don't get it," Sano burst in. "You're telling me Shinomori was finally taking you seriously as Oniwabanshuu... training you and everything?"

Misao nodded, feeling a bittersweet mix of pride and loss.

"So... what the hell happened?" Sano gestured in exasperation. "Did he get bored? Or did you annoy him one too many times?"

Misao whacked Sano over the head with the bucket she'd been soaking her ankle in. Water flew everywhere. "I'm trying to tell you what the hell happened, chicken-head!" she roared. "So shut up and let me finish my story!"

Sano shook the water out of his hair with a grin. "Please continue, itachi-sama," he said, secretly pleased that his rude comment had somewhat lightened the tense, heavy atmosphere.

Misao glared at Sano, sighed in exasperation and resumed her tale...

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Misao shifted restlessly on her futon for what must have been the thousandth time since she'd gone to bed. It was an unseasonably warm

June evening, but that was only part of the reason she was having trouble sleeping. As always, her mind was filled with thoughts of her handsome okashira... but something about them had changed in recent months. What had once been the swooning reveries of a hero-worshipping teenager were now becoming the sober musings of a young woman deeply in love.

But what does it matter? No matter how much I love him... nothing has changed.

Misao winced, rolling on her back and throwing an arm across her eyes. She knew that wasn't exactly true. In the many months since she'd turned 18, she and Aoshi had trained together nearly every day. He was a tough, uncompromising teacher, always pushing her harder and farther than she wanted to go... but she rose to the challenge every time, grateful that he was finally taking her seriously. Being Aoshi, he wasn't exactly effusive in his comments about her performance, but he said enough for Misao to know she was doing well.

She knew her efforts had won her Aoshi's respect... even his admiration. And a few weeks ago, her patience was finally rewarded when Aoshi said she was ready to begin kodachi training in earnest. She doubled the amount of time she spent at practice, determined to excel in swordsmanship as she now did in the other onmitsu arts. The days continued to pass by much as they had before... except that Misao had started to feel a growing uneasiness... a dissatisfaction with the way things were in her life.

Training, meals, tea, shopping... helping at the Aoiya, sleeping... then up the next day for more of the same. It never bothered me before... why do I find it so empty now?

She closed her eyes... and the answer to that question appeared before her, gazing at her with calm blue eyes. She gritted her teeth, sitting straight up and shaking her head vigorously.

_Chikusho! It's not just my life that's the same... Aoshi-sama hasn't changed a bit. He may finally respect me as onmitsu... and I know he cares for me... but it's the same way he's always cared for me, like a child he's fond of. Sometimes I wonder if he's even __noticed__ I'm a full-grown woman now!_

She gripped the covers tightly, her lips trembling as despair washed over her. _When the hell am I gonna wake up and realize he'll never take my feelings for him seriously?_

Still, that part of her heart that remained ever-hopeful whispered softly --

You thought that he would never take you seriously as a member of the Oniwabanshuu, and look at him now... surely, with a little more time... a little more patience...

She flung the covers back and stood up, a frustrated rebuttal echoing in her mind. _How much more time could it possibly take? Except in training, he appears blind to the changes in me... I don't follow him around like an adoring puppy anymore... I try not to babble on in his presence... I make every effort to assist him in his paperwork, despite how dull I find it._ She dropped her head into her hands. _What the hell am I going to do about him?_

She suddenly stripped off her sleeping robe and donned her ninja uniform. At this rate, sleep would be hours in coming... and she had found that practicing her kata relaxed her. The moon was full, the yard bright... she would run through the stances she'd learned so far until she felt peaceful enough to attempt slumber again. Grabbing her kodachi, she silently slipped out of her room and down the hall.

Once outside, she stood for a moment admiring the pale, silvery aura surrounding the trees and rocks in the moonlit yard. Breathing deeply, she stepped into the yard, wriggling her bare toes in the soft grass. By the time she began her first stance, she'd lost all awareness of her surroundings, completely at peace and present only in that moment.

She was so focused on her kata that she didn't notice Aoshi's presence until she was halfway through the last stance. He was standing on the porch, watching her intently. Usually, his sudden appearances rattled her, but this time she didn't even flinch as her sword traced the last graceful arc. She held the final stance for several seconds, then turned to face Aoshi, bowing slightly and sheathing her sword.

"Okaeri, Aoshi-sama," she said, keeping her voice low.

"Tadaima," he replied, jumping down from the porch and walking up to her. "Couldn't sleep?"

She shook her head. "How did the meeting go?" she asked. "Was Taro as intractable as he was last time?"

"Iya... he was surprisingly talkative tonight." His eyes crinkled slightly at the corners, suggesting amusement. "Apparently, he recently made friends with Omasu... he asked me to pass on his best wishes to her, as well as an invitation to visit him again soon."

Misao chuckled. "Leave it to Omasu... she's great at softening up those stonewalling types."

They stood silently for a moment, and Misao felt the usual nervousness Aoshi's presence inspired in her. But the exasperation she had felt earlier gnawed at her. _I'm not running away now! It's so unusual for us to be completely alone like this... this may be a good opportunity to try to draw him out a bit more... if I can think of anything else to say to him, that is..._

But before she could open her mouth, Aoshi said --

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you before. You looked so serene... I hated to interrupt."

Misao raised shocked eyes to her okashira, who wore his usual sedate expression. "D- did I?" she stammered, puzzled by his choice of words.

"Aa. I'm not used to seeing you that way." He gazed at her calmly until she began fidgeting with her braid. His mouth twitched. "Now that's more like the Misao I know," he said, sparking her

temper.

"Ooh! You're teasing me again!" she fumed, stamping her foot. "And you didn't even say anything about my kata... some sensei you are!" She folded her arms and looked away from him, her nose in the air. She heard Aoshi utter a strange cough before answering --

"Your form was almost perfect."

Misao turned back to him, her whole face alight with joy. "Honto? Honto, Aoshi-sama?" A shadow fell over her delighted expression. "You said 'almost perfect.' What did I do wrong?"

"It's your grip... it's still not quite right," Aoshi said. "You still hold the kodachi too tightly... it makes your stance a little awkward and doesn't allow a full range of motion."

"I'm not sure if I know what you mean," Misao said, drawing her sword. "Can you show me?"

"Of course. Turn around and hold the sword as you normally do," Aoshi said. Misao complied, taking the initial stance from which she always began her kata... and nearly dropped her kodachi when she felt Aoshi fold his right hand around hers.

"See? Your hold is so tight your knuckles are going white," he said from his position directly behind her. "There's no need for such a death-grip... it's not like you're hanging from a rooftop. In this case, control is much more important than strength." He tightened his hand slightly, then withdrew it. "Misao, I want you to watch what I do, then copy it."

Misao tried to turn her head back to look at Aoshi, but he placed his hand atop her head and turned it back to center. "Eyes front," he said. Misao heard the hiss of a sword being drawn... then Aoshi's right hand came into her view, holding his own sword. He extended his arm right next to hers, imitating her position. "Now look at my fingers," he said. "Try to place yours exactly like mine to start... then we can make adjustments to suit your height and frame."

Misao followed his instructions, trying to ignore the buzzing in her ears and the butterflies in her belly. _He's so close to me... all I would have to do is lean back a bit, and... aagh! Concentrate, I have to concentrate..._

"Like this?" she queried, striving to keep her voice steady.

"Aa," Aoshi said. He sheathed his sword again and spent the next few minutes silently making tiny adjustments to the position of each finger and her thumb with both hands. Misao was glad he wasn't giving her instructions... it was all she could do to keep her composure, much less pay attention. When Aoshi had reached both arms around her, his body had briefly brushed hers... and the jolt she'd felt at the contact had taken her breath away. Even now, his position was much like an embrace... his strong arms around her... his body scant inches behind hers.

"There." Aoshi dropped his hands, but didn't move from his position. "Now, Misao... I want you to loosen your hold little by little, and don't stop until I tell you to."

Ignoring the flash of disappointment she felt, Misao dutifully obeyed her okashira. "Good... good... keep going... almost there... a bit more... stop."

Aoshi walked around until he was standing in front of Misao. "Now, run through your kata again," he said.

"Datte, Aoshi-sama! With a grip like this, one good hit will knock my sword loose!" Misao protested.

Aoshi ignored her objection. "Misao... I'm waiting," he said firmly.

Misao knew better than to argue with Aoshi when he used that tone. Sighing, she began her kata... and was amazed at how much easier and freer the motions felt. She completed the cycle without dropping her weapon or tightening her grip.

"Well done," Aoshi said, looking pleased. Then his eyes glinted as he swiftly drew one kodachi. "Defend yourself," he said sharply as he swung his sword at Misao.

She had no time to think. Reflexively, Misao's sword sliced the air, meeting Aoshi's with a loud clang.

"Again!" Clang.

"Again!" Clang.

Misao lowered her sword, panting. Aoshi flicked his wrist in a habitual gesture of cleansing and resheathed his weapon. "Now do you see?" he asked.

Misao sheathed her kodachi and raised her head, her eyes bright with excitement and understanding. "I do," she said. "I don't need to tighten my grip until just before our blades meet... and I don't even have to think about it. It just happens."

"Aa. It's a swordsman's instinct," Aoshi said. "Battle is like a dance... you need to be able to twist and bend and flow with the fight. If you think about it too hard... if you dwell on form and position and holding onto your sword... you'll freeze and become as useless as that stump over there." He walked up to her, laying a hand on her shoulder, his eyes warm with pride. "If you always approach swordplay the way you did when I first saw you tonight... and the way you did just now... you may become our greatest warrior."

Misao gaped at him. _Are my ears deceiving me?_ "A- arigatou, Aoshi-sama!" she finally choked out, bowing her head. "I'm not worthy of such a compliment."

Aoshi smiled slightly. "Maybe not yet," he said. "You still have much to learn. Like how not to lock your wrist when your blade meets another's... if you don't keep it somewhat flexible, the impact could shatter the bones... especially if he's stronger than you."

Misao furrowed her brow. "I don't know what you mean," she said.

"I'll see if I can show you," Aoshi said, taking hold of her right wrist. In the motion, he inadvertantly stroked the sensitive skin on the underside of the joint. Misao drew in her breath sharply as the contact sent another warm, pleasant jolt through her.

"Daijoubu, Misao?" Aoshi drew closer, looking worried. "Did I hurt you?"

Misao could feel herself blushing. "Iie," she murmured, eyes lowered, too embarrassed to meet his.

Aoshi gently lifted her chin. "You're flushed," he said. "And your breathing's shallow. Sumanu... I didn't realize how tired you must be. We should call it a night."

Misao shook her head. "Iie, Aoshi-sama... I'm not tired at all," she said softly, looking him directly in the eyes. _It's now or never... I'm not letting you ignore me as a woman anymore, Aoshi-sama..._

Aoshi looked confused... until Misao glanced down at her wrist, which his hand still loosely clasped. His eyes widened as she slowly drew her hand up and threaded her fingers through his.

Neither spoke or moved for at least a minute. It felt like an eternity. Misao's heart was pounding harder than it had during their impromptu practice. _What will you do, Aoshi-sama? What should I do?_

Misao watched in wonder as Aoshi's impassive facade slowly crumbled, emotions dancing across his face like leaves in a windstorm. _Denial... regret... anger... guilt... and..._

His eyes flickering with some unidentifiable feeling, Aoshi took his left hand and raised it to Misao's face. She could barely breathe as he ran his callused fingertips lightly over her forehead... her eyes, which fluttered closed... her flushed cheeks... and finally, her slightly parted lips. The spasms of feeling that gripped her nearly made her moan aloud.

Gods... so this is what Okon and Omasu are always talking about. This is desire...

She felt Aoshi tighten his grip on her right hand, pulling her closer. His free hand cupped her chin, tilting it. She opened one eye halfway, her pulse quickening as she saw him lower his head toward hers. His eyes were a dark, turbulent gray, as if some struggle raged within him.

Oh, Aoshi-sama... Aoshi... I've waited so long for you... for this...

Then, as their lips hovered a few inches apart... he abruptly pulled away. "No," he said hoarsely. "No, Misao... we can't do this."

The shock to Misao was as great as if he'd slapped her across the face. "Doushite?" she said, reaching for his hand. He yanked it away and turned around, walking toward the Aoiya. Misao raced after him, grabbing the back of his shirt. "Aoshi-sama, don't! Don't back away now! Tell me why!" she said, allowing the desperation she felt free

rein.

He stopped. "Let go of me, Misao," he said firmly without turning around.

"Dame! Not until you answer me!" She rested her forehead against his back. "Aoshi-sama, we... we almost..."

"I know," he said, his voice devoid of feeling. "Gomen nasai... it will never happen again."

In a sudden surge of fury, Misao pulled Aoshi around to face her. "What if I want it to happen again?" she shouted. "Dammit, Aoshi! I can't stand it anymore! Finally, after months... no, years... of waiting for you to see me for the woman I am... instead of the child you raised... you finally do. And you want to run away now?" Her voice cracked as a single tear traced a path down one cheek. "Aoshi... I love you so much... and I've wanted this for so long... can't you give us a chance? Just one chance?"

A warm breeze stirred the leaves in the trees and blew Aoshi's bangs away from his blank eyes. He looked away from Misao as he gave his answer --

"No."

Misao's whole body went numb, then weak, her legs refusing to support her. Aoshi turned away from her as she sank to her knees, tears streaming down her face. She feebly raised a hand to him in supplication. "Aoshi-sama..." she called brokenly. "Aoshi-sama... why? Why can't you at least try? I don't understand..."

Aoshi paused on the steps, turning to look at Misao one last time. She would never forget his beautiful, impassive face... his sky-blue, distant eyes... his silky black hair waving gently in the breeze as he carelessly tossed out the words that shattered her heart --

"I know, Misao... so I'll make it plain. There's nothing between us... and there never will be.

"Sayonara..."

Aoshi disappeared into the building... and Misao fell face down on the lawn, sobbing and tearing at the grass. "Baka..." she wailed, pounding the ground. "I'm so stupid... come back, Aoshi-sama... I take it all back... please don't leave... please..."

The only answer she received was the tinkling of the wind chimes on the porch as the wind picked up and rain began to fall.

-- End of Chapter 11 --

12. These Changing Times

****These Changing Times****

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes

to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****Chapter 12 -- The Doctor Is In****

Misao woke to the sound of chatter and laughter outside and a delicious odor of tea and miso soup wafting through the air. She vaulted out of bed, ignoring the ache her abrupt movements awakened in her ankle. _Chikusho! Slept through breakfast again... poor Himura's probably got his hands full trying to manage cooking and Kintou and Kaoru-san..._

Cursing herself for being lazy and unhelpful, she threw on her ninja gear and bolted out the door... only to slide to an abrupt halt at the scene before her. She rubbed her eyes... astonished to see Sanosuke hovering over the cooking-pot and ladeling soup into Yahiko's outstretched bowl. The fighter looked up at Misao, a proud, cocky smile on his face.

"Sano?" She gave her eyes another good rub. "I'm seeing things, right?"

"Nope... it's breakfast," Sanosuke said. "It's not much... soup and some pickled vegetables. And tea, of course." He motioned Misao to an empty spot on the porch. "Figured you should stay off that ankle until Genzai-sensei has a look at it again... so I made breakfast for everybody."

"Uso!" Misao sputtered. "Since when do you cook? I'll bet it's worse than Kaoru-san's..."

Sano assumed an indignant expression. "Oi, weasel girl... at least try it before you insult it," he said brusquely. "Nobody else complained."

"Yeah, it's actually pretty good," Yahiko said around a mouthful. "Who'd have thought?"

Misao took the soup bowl from Sano, sniffing the contents skeptically. _It certainly smells good..._ "Here goes nothing," she said doubtfully, taking a sip. Her eyes brightened. "Not bad," she said, her eyes twinkling. "Nowhere near as good as mine, of course..."

"Che, some gratitude," Sano grouched, handing her a cup of tea.

She giggled. "Ne, Sano where's Himura?" she asked, looking around the yard. "He's usually up early these days."

"Right here," Kenshin said as he rounded the corner, an empty tray in his hand. His eyes sparkled mischievously as he addressed Sanosuke "Kaoru told me to tell you your cooking was surprisingly edible," he said with a teasing grin.

"Heh. It's way better than hers and she knows it," Sano said, returning Kenshin's grin. "What does the ever-diplomatic rurouni have to say?"

Kenshin winked at Misao. "It's not as good as Misao-dono's," he said.

Sano snorted as Misao gave him a wide, "I-told-you-so" grin. "Everybody's a critic," he muttered, pouring himself a bowl of soup.

"Misao-dono, how are you feeling this morning?" Kenshin asked.

"Fine... I'm sorry I slept late," she said. "I'll take care of the dishes in a few minutes."

"Iya," Kenshin said. "Sano told me your ankle is bothering you again... so you should get to the clinic as soon as possible."

"Leave that to me, Kenshin," Sano said, draining his second helping of soup. "C'mon, Misao, I'll walk you over there."

Misao looked at Sano, then back at Kenshin and sighed.

"I suppose it's no good to argue, with you both ganging up on me this way," she said wearily, setting aside her half-empty teacup.

"Sessha?" Kenshin said, wearing his most wide-eyed, innocent expression. Misao stuck her tongue out at Kenshin, then yelped in surprise as Sano lifted her off the porch and set her on the ground. She couldn't help wincing as her weight bore down on her tender ankle. Sano's eyes narrowed at Misao's pained expression.

"That's it no more walking for you," he said, sweeping her into his arms.

"Matte, Sano--" Misao protested, blushing as Yahiko started making kissing noises. "Urusai, midget," she growled, shaking her fist at the boy.

"You gonna make me, limpy?" he said, grinning broadly.

"Kono...! Just watch me, you little Sano, put me down! Mou!" Misao pounded ineffectual fists against Sano's chest as both he and Yahiko laughed at her.

"You've had enough exercise this morning, itachi-chan," Sano said, carrying his struggling burden toward the doujou's front gate. "You can think up a good punishment for the brat while Genzai-sensei's

checking your ankle." He called back over his shoulder --

"Ja na, Kenshin, Yahi--"

He stopped short as a short young man wearing the familiar gray uniform of the Tokyo police sprinted through the gate, skidding to a halt in front of Sanosuke.

"Yahiko-kun Sanosuke-san!" he panted. "Come quick!"

"What's up, Shinichi?" Yahiko asked, jumping down from the porch.

"They've captured one of those thieves you guys've been looking for," Shinichi said. "But they had to take him to the clinic someone tried to kill him before he could talk he's still alive, but the doctors say he might not be for long."

Sanosuke was out of the gate by the time Shinichi finished his first sentence. "Hold on tight, Misao," he said, tightening his grip on the ninja girl as he raced toward the clinic.

"Oi, Sanosuke! Wait for us!" Yahiko shouted as he and Shinichi sped after Sano and Misao. Kenshin stared after them for a moment, remembering the days when he would have been the first one to rush to the clinic in such a situation. He shook his head, smiling ruefully.

"Yare, yare" he sighed. _Things certainly have changed but I suppose it's for the best_

He heard a faint calling that sounded like his name. His smile grew brighter. "Coming, Kaoru!" he called back, jogging back toward their room.

Sanosuke set Misao gently on her feet just inside the clinic door. "Can you manage from here?" he asked her. "I'd like to get a look at that guy they brought in for the robberies maybe I'll recognize him or something."

Misao shook her head vigorously. "I'm coming with you," she said firmly. "We're supposed to be partners in this thing, remember?"

"Yeah, but --" Sano began to protest. Misao ignored him as she began walking awkwardly down the hall. Sano rolled his eyes, following her. _Stubborn little weasel I suppose that's part of her charm, though_

"Misao-chan!" Genzai-sensei stepped out of one of the rooms, wiping his hands on a towel. He eyed her with a fatherly scowl. "Don't tell me you reinjured that ankle," he said sternly.

"Aah... eeto" Misao said, giving an embarrassed little laugh. "It's not injured, exactly just kind of sore"

Genzai-sensei sighed. "Come on in here," he said, motioning toward the room he'd just exited. "I'll take a look at it and wrap it for you again."

"Uh, chotto, sensei can we wait a minute? Sano and I would like to see the thief that was brought in this morning," Misao said.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Genzai-sensei said. "He's definitely not up to visitors yet. The man was barely alive when the police brought him in this morning... apparently, he was attacked in his prison cell after the police finished questioning him." The old doctor shook his head. "I can't imagine who could have gotten past all that security and still have had time to butcher that prisoner so thoroughly. I know he's a criminal, but I can't help feeling sorry for him..."

Misao and Sano exchanged a look that clearly said... _I don't!_

"Now come on in here, Misao-chan... let's get you fixed up," Genzai-sensei said. Misao took Sano's arm and hobbled after the doctor.

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Megumi slowly removed the kerchief she'd used to keep her hair out of her face during the operation, shaking the long ebony tresses out with a sigh. _Not more than a day in Tokyo... and already we're performing major surgery. If I'd known we were arriving in the middle of a major crime wave, I'd have brought more help..._

"Megumi-sensei?"

She smiled at Tatsuya's quiet voice. Her assistant had worked with her long enough to know she usually liked to be left alone for a few minutes after surgery. _He's too considerate to interrupt me for anything less than urgent... so..._

"What is it, Tatsuya-san?" she asked.

"The police would like to speak with you as soon as possible," he said. "Shall I tell them you're indisposed?"

Megumi's eyes narrowed. "Do you remember the name of the officer who made the request?"

Tatsuya nodded. "Inspector Fujita Goro. He was quite adamant about needing to see you... otherwise I wouldn't have disturbed you."

Megumi's nostrils flared in irritation. "I'm sure he was," she said. "Tell the inspector I'll be right with him. Where is he?"

"Watching over our patient," Tatsuya said. "Do you know him, sensei?"

Megumi's cinnamon-brown eyes snapped with anger. "All too well," she said curtly. "I'll be with him as soon as I've changed. Thank you, Tatsuya-san."

Tatsuya bowed wordlessly and exited the room.

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Misao flexed her sore leg experimentally. "It's amazing what a few well-wrapped bandages can do," she said. "It doesn't hurt at all anymore. Arigatou, Genzai-sensei!"

The old doctor frowned at her. "Keep on overworking that ankle and a few bandages won't help you next time," he said gruffly, glancing at Sano. "Sanosuke-kun, keep her out of trouble, all right?"

"I'll try, sensei," Sano said with a grin.

"Huh. He's more likely to get me into trouble," Misao said impishly.

Sanosuke gave her a wicked grin that told Misao as plainly as words what kind of trouble he had in mind. Misao swatted his shoulder, glaring at him. "What'd I do?" he protested.

Genzai-sensei smiled at them. "I'd better go check on that bandit," he said. "If you wait a minute, I'll let you know if you can have a quick look at him before you go."

"Arigatou, sensei," Sano said. The doctor nodded and left the room.

Sano turned briefly to Misao, feigning a put-upon expression. "If you're done beating up on me, I think I'll go get some fresh air," he said, heading for the door. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Matte, Sano!"

He looked back at Misao, raising an eyebrow.

Misao reddened slightly. "Don't go yet... there's something I need to say you," she said in a low voice.

Sano assumed a more serious expression. He slid the door shut and walked over to where Misao sat on the examining table, resting his hands lightly on her knees. "Nani?" he asked, his eyes warm.

Misao took a deep breath. "About last night... I wanted to thank you," she said. "Even though it was hard for me... I'm glad I told you about what happened. It made me feel better, somehow."

She placed a hand over one of Sano's as she talked. His chest tightened as he remembered holding her as she cried the night before. "You don't have to thank me... I'm glad it helped you," he said, taking her hand in his and squeezing it. "I just want you to be happy, Misao." He flushed and looked away for a moment. Then his eyes met hers again, dark and determined. "I care about you... so much," he said in a husky whisper.

Misao felt as if her heart had lodged itself somewhere in her throat. _Oh, Sano... please don't... I can't... it's too soon..._ She swallowed, blushing furiously as she wracked her brain for a way to respond to Sano's revelation... until she realized with a start there was only one response she wanted to give.

"It makes me happy to know that," she said softly, her eyes brimming with emotion. "Because I care about you, too."

Her reply sent Sano's heart soaring, filling him with a mixture of joy and relief. "Misao..." he murmured, leaning over and kissing her with a tenderness she found unbearably moving. A few drops of moisture seeped from her eyes and trickled down her cheeks.

"Sumanu... I know you're still hurting," Sano whispered, kissing her tears away, then cupping her face in his hands and pressing his forehead to hers. "I just wanted you to know how I feel. And that I'll be waiting here for you... for as long as it takes."

"Sano..." she said, her voice trailing off as she pulled back slightly and met his earnest, adoring gaze. _Will you really wait for me? Should I ask you to?_

"Shh... daijoubu. You don't have to say anything," he whispered, silencing her with another, more passionate kiss. Misao felt her heartbeat accelerate as he pulled her gently toward him, his arms loosely encircling her waist. She felt his thighs pressing against her closed knees as they kissed, and instinctively parted them. Obstruction removed, she slid to the edge of the table and pressed her body flush against his. She smiled briefly at Sano's surprised gasp, followed by a low moan as he tightened his arms around her waist, sliding his hands slowly up her back, then down to cup her buttocks, settling her more firmly against his growing arousal. The jolt of pleasure his movement sent through her made her respond without thinking, sliding her hands from his back down to his taut rear, pushing him harder against her. Their kisses grew wild, their thrusting more rapid as they gave themselves over to their bodies, aware only of the growing ache they were building in each other and their need to soothe it.

Finally, Sano broke away and stepped back, his breathing labored. "Misao," he panted. "I... we..."

She smiled shakily, striving to bring her own breathing back under control. "Should stop?" she said.

Sano nodded, not trusting his voice. Misao leaned over and kissed the tip of his nose. "Are you sure?" she murmured, her mouth barely an inch from his own.

Cursing, he claimed those teasing lips once more, nipping her bottom lip in retaliation before pulling away. "Damn you, itachi-chan," he said, flashing a half-smile as he wiped away the sweat beading on his brow. "Now I've gotta take a walk to cool down."

"I'll come with you." Misao climbed down from the table, but Sano shook his head vigorously.

"Iya. That'll defeat the whole purpose," he said, winking at her. "I'll be right back, babe."

"Don't be long," she said, pouting prettily, one hand on her cocked hip. Sano stared at her... and before she could react, he pulled her into his arms again, holding her tightly, whispering raggedly in her ear --

"Gods, Misao... how do you do that?"

"Nani?" she said, her voice muffled against his chest.

He released his grip on her and tipped her chin up for another lingering kiss. "How do you make me want you so much?" he murmured a few moments later as they separated, gazing into each other's eyes.

Misao felt a wave of heat wash over her body in reponse to his words. _I could say the same thing to him,_ she thought, looking away from him in embarrassment as she fully grasped just how out of control they'd been moments before... and how little she'd cared. So much for using good sense and judgment... before she'd finally fallen asleep the night before, she'd been considering asking Sano to give her some space until she could sort out the tangled mess her feelings for him had become in recent days.

_But lately... I just __look__ at him and... oh, hell, I'm tired of fighting it. There's no reason to... considering how we feel..._

She raised her eyes to his again, giving him a coy smile. "I don't know... but I sure hope I can keep it up," she whispered. She ran her fingertips slowly down his cheek, then gave it a playful slap. "Weren't you going for a walk, tori-atama?" she asked sweetly, reveling in his pole-axed expression.

"Aa," Sano grunted, swiftly heading for the door, praying that by the time he got there his body would be back to normal, and he would be free of the overwhelming urge to lay Misao down on that table and finish what they'd started a few moments ago. _Come on, baka-yarou... think about laundry... fishing... drinking tea... safe, boring things..._

Sighing, he slid the door open... and nearly tripped over Yahiko. "Where the hell are you going in such hurry, chicken-head?" he said.

"Nowhere in particular," Sano responded irritably. "What the hell are you doing sneaking around here like that? Where's your police buddy?"

"Saitou sent him back to check on that traitor cop... make sure he's still protected," Yahiko said. "I tried to get in to see the guy they caught, but Megumi says no visitors allowed for now, until --"

Sanosuke grabbed Yahiko by the shoulders.

"Who says? You mean... the fox-lady is back already?"

Yahiko pulled away, looking aggravated. "Yeah. She helped stitch the thief up last night," he said. "What's with you anyway? You're acting weirder than normal..."

"Where is she?" Sano asked.

"Back there, arguing with old grasshopper-face over where they should move the prisoner," Yahiko said. "It was pretty boring, so I thought I'd go see Tsubame-chan. Genzai-sensei says she'll be able to go home tomorrow."

"That's great news!" Misao said cheerfully, walking slowly into the hall. "Ne, Sano?"

"Yeah... great," he replied vaguely, staring off into space.

Yahiko shook his head. "What did you do to him, weasel girl? Knock his brain loose or something?"

Misao glared at him. "Don't you have something else to do, Yahiko-_chan_" she said emphatically.

"Hai, hai," he said, grinning. "I'll leave you two sweethearts alone. Ja!"

He raced down to the end the hall, bracing himself for one of Misao's kempo kicks... and was disappointed to find she hadn't even attempted to chase him. She was still standing with Sanosuke. Yahiko watched as she took Sano's hand, saying something to him with a worried look on her face. He snapped something back, pulled his hand away and stalked down the hall in the opposite direction from where Yahiko stood. Misao's eyes flashed with hurt anger as she turned and followed Sano, limping slightly.

Yahiko's grin widened. _Hah! They really __do__ like each other! Yutarou owes me lunch at the Akabeko... and wait'll I tell Tsubame-chan!_

Chuckling, he knocked on Tsubame's door.

.....

"What the hell is the matter with you, Sano?" Misao grabbed Sano's arm and pulled him around to face her.

"I said nothing!" he thundered, his face hard and angry. "Now let me go. I need to take a walk, remember?"

Misao's irritated expression melted into consternation. "You... you're angry with me, aren't you," she said, her lower lip trembling. "Because... because of what happened... what we did."

Her imminent tears snapped Sano out of his frustrated haze. "Oh, no, Misao... no," he said, his voice softening. He gently squeezed her shoulders. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'm not mad at you at all."

She sniffled, blinking back her tears. "Then it's all right," she said with a tremulous smile. "Kedo... if it's not me you're upset with, then who...?" It was a rhetorical question. She'd heard Yahiko mention that Megumi was back... she just wanted to hear Sano admit that it was the return of the female doctor that had provoked his anger.

And I want to know why... after all this time... she still has the power to upset you so much. What was she to you, Sano?

As if he'd heard her thoughts, Sano turned his dark eyes from her questioning blue-green gaze, his expression inscrutable. Before he could reply, a low, slightly husky female voice intruded --

"I hate to interrupt... but you're blocking our way. Could you step aside, please?"

Sano jolted as if someone had poked him with something sharp. Misao felt herself blushing, and cursed silently for being so easily intimidated. "Gomen nasai... of course," she said graciously, stepping aside and pulling herself up to her full height as she turned toward the speaker.

Megumi was holding one end of a stretcher, wearing her usual blue doctor's smock. Saitou stood behind her, holding the other end, his usual amused smirk firmly in place. A handsome, slightly built man with light brown hair stood between them, holding the stretcher in the middle in what appeared to be an attempt to keep the bandaged man lying in it as steady as possible.

Megumi barely spared Sano a glance... it was Misao who had captured her attention. Her lovely, unusual cinnamon-colored eyes widened as recognition set in.

"Why... it's Makimachi Misao!" She beamed at the young onmitsu in genuine delight. "Goodness, but you've grown. I almost --"

" '...didn't recognize you.' " Misao finished, laughing. "I've been getting that a lot since I came back to Tokyo. You look well, Megumi-san. How is your brother?"

"Can we postpone this touching reunion until after we've finished moving this ahou?" Saitou cut in impatiently.

Both Misao and Megumi shot him dirty looks, to which he replied with a nasty grin. Sanosuke stepped forward, clearing his throat.

"Why don't you let me take that for you, fox-lady?" he offered gruffly.

Megumi's eyes narrowed as she assessed Sanosuke silently for a moment. "I see you haven't changed much, rooster-head," she drawled. "But your manners are improving. Your assistance isn't necessary, though... the room we're taking this patient to is right next to you."

"Oh! Then allow me," Misao said, sliding the door open.

"Arigatou," Megumi said, puffing a bit as she and Saitou carefully maneuvered the stretcher through the door. The man's face was almost completely obscured by bandages, but Sano studied it intently anyway. He exhaled sharply in exasperation as Saitou disappeared through the doorway.

"Che... can't even see the guy," he said. "What a waste of time. Let's get the hell out of here, Misao."

"Chotto matte," Saitou called. "Before you leave, I need to speak with the weasel girl."

Misao gritted her teeth as she entered the room. "I do have a name... and I'd appreciate it if you started using it, Fujita-san," she hissed.

"As you wish... Makimachi-san," Saitou responded with a mocking smile. He held out a folded piece of paper. "I have a message for you to deliver to your okashira. He's staying at the Midori-ya. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that speed is of the essence." He eyed her wrapped ankle, raising one eyebrow questioningly.

"Don't worry about me," Misao said, taking the piece of paper. "I'll make sure he gets this immediately." She was out of the room like a shot. Sano moved to follow her, but Saitou blocked the door, saying --

"Ahou ga. She doesn't need any distractions right now."

"Teme! Since when do I have to listen to you?" Sano growled, his voice rising.

"Be quiet, both of you," Megumi whispered harshly. "You're disturbing my patient."

The man on the bed was stirring. He moaned, holding one bandaged hand up feebly as if to ward off a blow.

"No... okashira... no," he mumbled weakly, tossing restlessly. "Swear... no... betray... please..."

In an instant, Saitou was crouched beside the bed. "Your okashira... who is he?" he asked in a low voice.

"No... never betray..." the man moaned, his voice rising to a wail. "Please! Don't!"

Saitou snorted and rose to his feet. He turned to face Megumi. The doctor's voice was quiet and deadly calm... but her eyes blazed with fury.

"Fujita-san... I must ask you to leave. Immediately," she said.

"Gladly," he said. "This ahou is in no condition to reveal anything of use to me. My men will be posted as we agreed... and I will return tomorrow to check on his progress." He stalked out of the room without another word.

Tatsuya and Sanosuke began speaking at once --

"Oi, fox-lady --"

"Ano... Megumi-sensei --"

"Are you all right?" they finished in unison.

Megumi didn't answer. She bent over the patient, whispering soothingly to him as his thrashings subsided. He sighed and fell silent once more. Megumi stood up and exhaled sharply, her whole body trembling with anger. "I hate that twisted cop," she whispered fiercely. "He has no conscience... no heart... no feelings whatsoever." She motioned to the two men. "Come... we should leave the patient in peace now. The guard is on his way."

Sano glanced back at the prisoner. _Kono yarou... I'll be keeping an

eye on you, too._

"Sanosuke!" Megumi's sharp, impatient voice interrupted his reverie.

"Yare, yare... I'm coming, already," he grumbled, exiting the room.

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Aoshi's eyes snapped open at the gentle rap on his door. "Come," he said, remaining seated.

A servant slid the door open. "Shinomori-san, you have a visitor," she said, bowing respectfully before stepping aside to reveal a breathless, disheveled Misao.

"Misao," Aoshi said, surprised. He began to rise, but she waved him back down, fighting to catch her breath.

"Dai... joubu," she gasped. "Just... ran here... from... clinic. Message... from... Saitou." She limped into the room, handing Aoshi the folded paper. He skimmed it quickly, his eyes narrowing.

"Did he say anything else?" he asked Misao. She shook her head.

"Just that it had to be delivered fast," she said, still panting. "Doushite?"

Aoshi handed her the message. "Read," he said.

Misao took the note, her mouth dropping open as she read the concise message. Her troubled eyes met Aoshi's as he said quietly --

"It seems Saitou suspects the prisoner at the clinic was the victim of a very specific sword technique. One that few have ever mastered..."

"Kaiten Kenbu Rokuren... the succession technique of Kodachi Nitou Ryuu."

-- End of Chapter 12 --

13. These Changing Times

****These Changing Times****

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the

tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

****Note:**** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

****Chapter 13 -- Round and Round****

"I don't get it," Misao said as she set down her empty teacup. "Jiya told me my grandfather was the only master of Kodachi Nitou Ryuu when he lived. Did he ever teach it to anyone besides you?"

Aoshi shook his head. "He didn't really teach me," he said. "He had barely begun training me in that particular style when he fell ill. I relied on those teachings and memory to train myself later on." He took a sip of tea. "That's not to say he never taught anyone else... I'm just not aware of him having done so."

"My father never learned, I know that," Misao said, her brow furrowed. "He preferred using a single kodachi so he could combine his sword technique with kempo like you used to do. Not that he ever enjoyed swordplay much, to hear Jiya tell it..."

"Sou da na," Aoshi said. "Sorata-san vastly preferred weaponless combat. He said it increased the odds that his opponent would be left alive." His eyes assumed a faraway expression as he murmured --

"He never did like killing much... especially after you were born. He once told me his worst fear would be for you to see him with the blood of another on his hands..."

Aoshi's voice trailed off as he remembered Makimachi Sorata's anguished expression the evening he'd spoken those words...

~~~~~

Sorata stared down at his trembling hands, splashed with the blood of the rebel spies he and Aoshi had just cut down without hesitation. Aoshi watched as his leader's wide blue-green eyes shimmered with unshed tears. He whispered --

"My little Misao... she's so innocent of the violent world in which we live... I want her to forever remain that way. I never want her to see me like this..."

As always, Aoshi felt awkward and strange in the face of such an emotional display. Still, Sorata was his leader and a man he admired immensely... though not to the level which the 13-year-old youth worshipped the okashira of the Oniwabanshuu, who was Sorata's father and Aoshi's mentor.

So Aoshi felt he owed it to Sorata to at least try to support him. "She won't, Sorata-san," he said in his calm, clear young voice. "It's not like things are always this way. We only fight when absolutely necessary..."

Sorata closed his eyes. "I know," he murmured. "We're not warriors like the Shinsengumi. We're protectors... informants... not hitokiri. And yet... I can't help but fear that despite all my best efforts to shield her... I won't be able to protect my Misao from the madness in which we all are forced to live. That I won't be able to hide these bloodstained hands from her."

He drew a shaky breath. "And worse... I fear that someday... she, too, will know what it's like to... to... oh, my sweet, beautiful child..."

He cried a little then, the tears silently sliding down his face. Aoshi stood silently, averting his eyes, while a scornful little voice inside him wondered how a grown man -- the okashira's son, no less! -- could allow himself to lose control of his emotions in the presence of one of his own men.

But within thirty seconds Sorata had regained his composure. As they departed for headquarters, Sorata addressed Aoshi in a low voice --

"Aoshi-kun... I have a favor to ask of you."

"Hai, Sorata-san... I won't tell anyone of this."

"Iie. That's not what I meant. I want you to promise me you'll always protect Misao."

"Of course, Sorata-san!" Aoshi replied, a trifle indignantly. "She's the okashira's granddaughter... I would give my life for her, as I would for you or her mother. I owe Akihito-sama at least that much..."

Even though Sorata had put his mask back on, Aoshi could see the smile in his eyes.

"I know you would, Aoshi-kun. And I appreciate that more than I can say." He grew serious. "But what I'm asking of you goes beyond physical protection. I want you to protect Misao's innocence... her complete ignorance of the violent world in which we live... for as long as you can." His eyes burned intensely as he whispered --

"I never want her to have to wash blood from her hands. Never. Can you promise me that, Aoshi-kun?"

Aoshi shrugged slightly. "Hai, Sorata-san," he said. "But I don't guess there's much chance of that, her being a little kid and all."

Sorata barked out a short, humorless laugh. "Children grow up, my foolish young friend," he said. "And Misao is one of the Makimachi clan. My parents are probably planning her training as we speak."

Aoshi was silent for a moment. "Don't worry, Sorata-san," he said solemnly. "I'll help take care of her. And I'll be the one to fight... the one with blood on my hands... so she won't have to be."

Sorata stared at him for a moment, then said softly --



Startled, Aoshi met Misao's confused, yearning gaze. \_Kuso. How thoughtless of me... now I'm getting her hopes up again. I should say something neutral... change the subject...\_

But one look into her eyes... Sorata-san's eyes... stopped him. \_Misao... I can't bring myself to hurt you again...\_

He returned her gaze steadily and told her the truth --

"Aa. I did... and still do..."

He watched her eyes brighten, her mouth curve in the sweetest of smiles... and decided that now would be a good time for them to check out Saitou's report. He rose from his seat. "Let's go to the clinic," he said holding out a hand to her. "I'd like to see this prisoner for myself."

Misao hesitated, then allowed Aoshi to help her to her feet. She was mystified by his words and actions, especially considering the distant way he'd treated her the day before. \_Why is he being so nice to me now? Damn him... I'd made up my mind to treat him as coldly as he did me... but now...\_

She shrugged and followed Aoshi out the door. \_I should know better than to try to figure \_\_him\_\_ out... better to concentrate on trying to find out who else could have possibly mastered Nitou Ryuu without the Oniwabanshuu's knowledge... and is now using its techniques to slaughter people without mercy...\_

.....

"So that's the new sensei who's taking over Oguni Clinic," Sanosuke said, lounging against the wall as Megumi sat down to complete the morning's paperwork. "Funny... I expected an older guy. You sure he's ready to run a hospital on his own?"

"Tatsuya-san may be young, but he's our best student," Megumi said proudly. "He has been since his arrival last year. He'd already had some medical schooling in America... but it's more than that. He has excellent instincts and tremendous compassion for his patients... not to mention unparalleled surgical skills."

"Sounds like a regular genius," Sano said, rolling his eyes and yawning.

Megumi smiled evilly. "And what have you been doing with yourself these past two years, rooster-head?" she said, her voice sweetly sarcastic. "Apparently, you've managed to stay out of jail... which I suppose for you would count as a great accomplishment. I imagine you've spent all this time perfecting your street-fighting and dice-throwing techniques?"

Sanosuke almost welcomed the blinding flash of rage brought on by Megumi's nasty comments. \_Man, she still knows exactly where to hit me... even after two years. The smug, self-righteous bitch...\_

"It so happens that I've been looking after Kenshin and Jou-chan," he hissed through clenched teeth. His eyes gleamed wickedly. "Not to mention their family. They have a son now, did you know? Himura Kintou. He looks a lot like Jou-chan... but he's got Kenshin's sweet



disposition. And she's pregnant again... with twins, apparently."

Megumi scowled. "I'm perfectly aware of that," she said in a tone that could have frozen boiling water. "That's part of the reason I'm here. Genzai-sensei said she's been having problems, and he'd rather me look after her than some strange doctor she barely knows."

"I'm sure they'll be grateful for the help," Sano said, his face growing deadly serious. "Shikashi... you'd better be nice to Jou-chan, or you'll answer to me. She doesn't need any of your kitsune bullshit right now."

Megumi sighed and put her pen down. Her shrewish glare faded, replaced by a weary, wistful expression. "Don't be an ass, Sanosuke," she said. "I'm a doctor first and a woman second... especially where a patient is concerned. You of all people should remember that."

Sanosuke felt like he'd been punched in the gut. Megumi rose gracefully from her chair and picked up a small black bag and her medicine chest.

"In fact, I think I'll go see her now," Megumi said. "It will be good to see everyone at the doujou again."

"Especially Kenshin, ne?" Sano said with a deliberate sneer.

Megumi smiled sadly, meeting Sanosuke's eyes fully for the first time that day. He was taken aback by the mix of sorrow and regret he saw there.

"You're wrong, Sanosuke," she said softly. "Of course I'll be happy to see Ken-san again... but it's not what you think. I've accepted things as they are... just as I had when I left Tokyo two years ago."

"But you said..." Sanosuke fell silent, unable to repeat the words which had given him so much pain back then.

"You probably misunderstood me," Megumi said. "As you always have." She shook her head and exited. Sano stared at the empty doorway for a long time... wondering -- for about the thousandth time since he'd known her -- exactly what the hell the kitsune-sensei was talking about.

\_The day she left for Aizu... she told me she still loved Kenshin... and always would. That he was her ideal... the kind of man she wanted to marry someday. And that she wouldn't settle for anyone less...\_

He closed his eyes as he completed the thought bitterly  
--

\_Including me...\_

.....

"What's our next step, Aoshi-sama?" Misao asked as they approached the clinic. "I mean, until Jiya responds to your message?"

"We wait," Aoshi said. "There are no other leads to pursue right now. The proprietor of the Kaiko-ya is dead... Sekihara-san insists she remembers nothing of the night she was robbed... and Saitou has already interviewed Sanjou-san. The only thing left to do is examine the prisoner to see if Saitou is correct in his theory."

Misao swallowed, reluctant to bring up the thought that had been gnawing at her since she read Saitou's message. "Ano, Aoshi-sama... Saitou doesn't suspect you, does he?"

Aoshi's face remained impassive. "It would not be surprising if he did," he said. "It would be logical to suspect the only known master of Kodachi Nitou Ryuu... especially if he had sworn to bring to justice those who were dishonoring the Oniwabanshuu name."

"But to attack the man in a jail cell... without his sword... surely Saitou knows you would never do anything so cowardly?" Misao asked indignantly. "You would have released and challenged him, not simply slaughtered him."

"True," Aoshi said, a hint of a smile in his voice. He rested his hand on her head briefly. "Let's hope Saitou agrees with you."

Misao smiled at Aoshi, turned to the clinic door... and saw Sanosuke standing there, glaring at the two of them. Her smile vanished as she realized what he must be thinking. \_Oh no, Sano... it's not what you think... not at all...\_

Aoshi nodded at Sano. "Sagara," he said.

Sanosuke nodded curtly in response. "I suppose you're here to see the prisoner," he said gruffly. "You can forget it. The fox-lady says no visitors right now."

"I see," Aoshi said, unruffled by Sano's rude manner. "Then perhaps I can speak with Takani-sensei."

"She's not here," Sano said. "But her assistant is, if you want to talk to him instead. Ja."

He stalked by Misao without a word. She turned to follow him, but Aoshi said sharply --

"Misao. I may need your assistance."

Misao clenched her teeth, forcing down the rebellious impulse to ignore Aoshi and bolt after Sano. "Hai, okashira," she said, following him inside the building.

.....

"Are you sure that ankle is healed?" Unmei cocked her head, studying Misao with bright, knowing eyes. "You seem to be favoring the other today."

Misao swabbed her face with a towel. "I won't lie... it's a bit sore," she said sheepishly. "But I couldn't stand the thought of putting my training off again. Gomen nasai, sensei."

"Ah, well... you're done for the day, so no use lecturing you about it," Unmei said, patting Misao's hand. "But see that you soak it for at least half an hour tonight, and wrap it well tomorrow. Now, Misao-chan... I have some good news for you. My information network may have turned up something on those thieves you're looking for."

"Honto ni?" Misao asked, eyes bright with hopeful excitement. "That's wonderful! Arigatou gozaimasu! I'll be sure to pass the information on to my okashira... he's helping the police with the investigation."

"Is that so?" Unmei smiled politely, her eyes glittering briefly. "That would be Shinomori Aoshi, ne? The young prodigy who became okashira at 15..."

"Hai," Misao confirmed proudly. "Wow, you really do know a lot about us!"

Unmei's smile widened. "Everyone knows that story, child... at least in my circle. I would very much like to meet him. Do you think you can arrange it?"

"Of course! I was hoping he'd get the chance," Misao said, bouncing on her heels. "Would you like us to come by tonight?"

"I'd rather wait until I get a complete report from my informants," Unmei said. "It may take a day or two. I'll let you know as soon as it comes in."

"Wakatta wa! Mata ashita, Unmei-sensei," Misao said, bowing respectfully before dashing out the gate.

Unmei's smile grew tight and cold as her eyes darkened with sinister anticipation. "Soon," she muttered. "Soon you will be avenged, my dear Taki..."

.....

"It was so kind of you to invite me to stay for dinner," Megumi said to Kenshin, Kaoru and Misao.

"Not at all," Misao said cheerfully. "We had plenty of food, so it was no trouble." \_Yeah... we had plenty of food because that baka-yarou Sano didn't show up! Kuso... where the hell could he be?\_ "I only hope our company isn't too lively," Kenshin said with a smile as he tried to keep Kintou from throwing rice at their guest. Yahiko and Yutarou were bickering over some sort of bet, and Ayame and Suzume were giggling as they watched the two boys argue.

"Oh, no," Megumi said with a fond smile. "I usually eat with my brother's family, and they're far noisier. This actually helps me miss them less."

Kaoru chuckled. "And you had the added advantage of having Misao cook for you instead of me," she said good-naturedly.

Megumi gave a sly grin. "I have to admit, I may not have accepted your invitation otherwise," she said teasingly, eliciting laughter from the trio.

"Mou!" Kaoru mock-pouted. "I guess I know when I'm not wanted. Kenshin, can you help me to bed?"

"Of course, Kaoru," her husband replied, handing Kintou to Misao as she rose to follow them.

"Oyasumi, minna!" Kaoru said, smiling at Megumi as the others called out good-night. "It's so good to have you back, Megumi-san... I mean that as both doctor and friend."

"Arigatou, Kaoru-san," Megumi said warmly. "I'll come by to check on you tomorrow morning. Sleep well."

Megumi watched wistfully as Kenshin slowly escorted Kaoru toward their room, followed by Misao, who was singing a soft lullaby to Kintou. Megumi could see the baby's face peering over Misao's shoulder, his eyes growing heavier as they walked away.

\_Such a wonderful family... so like my brother's. Being around them makes it hard to be patient...\_

Megumi deliberately turned her attention to the arguing children, silently admonishing herself for indulging in self-pity. Yahiko was insisting that Yutarou owed him dinner at the Akabeko as soon as it reopened.

"You'll have to prove it to me first," Yutarou said, crossing his arms.

"I already did, baka-yarou!" Yahiko shouted. "You just don't want to admit I was right!"

"You're not," Yutarou said with a superior smile. "That story you told doesn't prove anything. Now, if you'd seen them kissing, I might believe you."

The mention of kissing made Ayame and Suzume laugh and squeal with embarrassed delight. Megumi cocked an eyebrow and interrupted --

"Now I'm curious... who are you talking about, Yutarou-kun?" she asked with a friendly smile.

Ignoring Yahiko's frantic waving and shushing, Yutarou answered casually --

"Yahiko and I have a bet about Sanosuke and Misao. Yahiko says they're in love... and I say they're just friends." He made a face. "Misao may be kinda tomboyish, but she's still too smart to go out with that big dumb jerk rooster-head."

"You're so stupid," Yahiko said, his desire to be tactful giving way to his need to top Yutarou. "I'm telling you, I saw them together at the clinic. Friends don't hold hands and look at each other like they did..."

The two boys took up their argument once again, but Megumi wasn't listening anymore. She was staring into the distance, her mind spinning.

\_Sanosuke and Misao... together? How can that be possible? What about Shinomori Aoshi?\_

A tiny voice in that rebellious, illogical corner of her mind added insistently --

\_What about me?\_

.....

Misao trudged wearily up to the last of the gambling houses. She'd looked everywhere for Sanosuke, but he wasn't at any of his usual haunts. Finally, when she was about to give up, she ran into his friend Kouji, who told her where he'd seen Sano last.

Misao took a deep breath, adjusted her uniform so that it was as modest as possible, and reached for the sliding door.

At that same moment, the door flew open, revealing a very drunk Sanosuke. He blinked several times.

"Misao?" His eyes hardened. "Th'hell 'r you doin' here?"

"Looking for you," she said, sniffing. "Gods, Sano, you smell like a sake storehouse! How much have you had to drink?"

"Nonerya damn bizness," he slurred, lurching into the street. "Now go 'way, weasel girl."

She scrambled around him to block his path. "No," she said. "Not until I'm sure you're okay. When you didn't show up at the doujou for dinner, I got worried about you."

Sano stared blearily at Misao. "Why?" he asked. "Why do you care?"

Misao took his hand. "Because you're my friend," she said softly. "And I know you're hurting. After all you've done for me all the times you've comforted me now it's my turn. Tell me what happened with Megumi-san."

Sano looked away. "There's nothin' to tell," he mumbled, shaking Misao's hand off. "We had a tumble or two. She left for Aizu. End of story."

Misao ignored the ache his blunt confession set off in her chest. "Is that so?" she said. "If that's all there is to tell why does she still upset you enough to send you to the sake bottle for comfort?"

"Who says she's the reason I'm out tonight?" he snarled. "Just felt like gettin' drunk hangin' out with m'friends 'sthere a law against that?"

"Of course not," Misao snapped, her patience stretched to the breaking point. "Datte, Sano"

"Aw, go home to bed, Misao-chan," he slurred, waving his hands at her in a shooing motion. "'Spast your bedtime yer okashira-sama'd be

pissed if he knew you were hangin' out with a loser drunk like me this late at night."

Misao suppressed the flash of temper his comments evoked. "Who says you're a loser drunk? And who says I give a damn what my okashira thinks?" she said firmly, her hands planted on her hips.

"You seemed to care this afternoon," Sano said with a sneer, his voice suddenly clear and whip-sharp. "Listen, Misao, I know how it is, okay? Why don't you just go home and dream about your precious Aoshi-sama and leave me alone? I don't need --"

Misao grabbed Sano's jacket in both hands, pulled him down toward her and cut him off with a bold kiss. Momentarily startled out of his rage, he wrapped her in his arms, his mouth yielding easily to hers. He reveled in the sweetness of their kiss for a full minute, then shoved Misao away.

"Now tell me you know how it is," she said, panting slightly.

"Chikusho, Misao..." he growled, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "You're playing with the wrong man. Go the hell home. Now. And stay away from me, if you know what's good for you."

Misao remained motionless, glaring at him. "You won't get rid of me that easily, tori-atama," she said fiercely. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm just as stubborn as you are. And I'm not gonna let you lump me in the same category as that kitsune-onna."

"Who says I am?" he retorted.

"I do," Misao said, her voice softening a bit. "Boy, Sano... she must've really messed you up bad when she left. And I'd love to hear about it... another time, when you aren't so shit-faced and surly."

Sano snorted. "Feh. Don' need yer pity don' wanna talk anymore 'bout th' damn kits'ne-sensei," he mumbled, turning away from her. "I'm goin' home."

Misao mentally threw up her hands, knowing there was no use arguing with him further. "That's the best idea you've had all night," she said. "Will you be okay?"

"Heiki," he said, waving her away. "I've gotten myself home lots of times like this. Mata ne, itachi-chan."

"Ja, baka tori," she said, watching as he wobbled down the street, aching with frustrated sympathy. \_Damn you, Sano... I'll get you to open up to me yet... to see that you can trust me. That I won't hurt you like she did...\_

But just then, she remembered the gentle way Aoshi had looked at her that afternoon... the kindness in his voice as he told her about her mother... the way her heart had pounded when he admitted he found her beautiful. She closed her eyes tightly, her throat thickening with remorse.

\_Sano... I have no right to make such promises. Not when I still see

his face in my dreams. Not when the smallest compliment from him starts fresh hope blossoming in my heart.\_

She gritted her teeth against the threatening tears.

\_Damn you, Aoshi-sama!\_

-- End of Chapter 13 --

## 14. These Changing Times

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^\_^;;

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**\*\*Chapter 14 -- Let the Games Begin\*\***

"Oi, Misao... what'cha makin'?" Yahiko looked over Misao's shoulder, watching as she dusted rice flour over a plateful of sweet-smelling rectangular cakes.

"Mochi," she replied, smacking his grabbing hand with the wooden mallet she was holding. "Dame! It's for lunch, midget! You'll have to wait awhile like the rest of us..."

"Itai!" he howled, rubbing his reddened fingers. "Man, I dunno what Sano sees in a violent tomboy like you. Guess it's the free food."

Misao threw the empty rice-bowl at Yahiko's head. "Get out, get out, get out!" she shrieked as Yahiko bolted out of the kitchen, laughing and jeering at her.

"Betcha can't catch me in those girly clothes, weasel-face!" he called, grinning as she dashed out the door after him.

"You're on, monkey-boy!" Misao shouted, her braid tumbling down from its neat coil as she chased Yahiko around the yard. He dodged and ducked as she tried to grab him, but finally tripped over a broken shinai and skidded to the ground, where Misao gleefully pounced on him, pummeling him until he finally cried --

"All right, all right, I give! Kuso... this is humilitating..."

Misao stood up, brushing the dust off her kimono with a cocky grin. "You asked for it, brat," she said. "But I could be persuaded not tell Yutarou-kun that I kicked your ass... if you make it worth my while."

"Che... now I can see why you and Sano get along so well--ouch!" Yahiko scowled, rubbing the ear Misao had just pinched. "Yare, yare... how about if I do the dishes for the next three days?"

"The next week," Misao said, crossing her arms. "And no more smartass comments about Sano. Deal?"

"Fine," Yahiko grumbled, shuffling off in the direction of the well.

"Ne, Yahiko? Are you going to the clinic?" Misao called after him.

"Yeah, why?"

"I made some extra mochi for Tsubame-chan and Tae-san," she said. "Let me pack it up and I'll come with you."

.....

"Ohayou gozaimasu, Megumi-sensei," Tatsuya said, smiling. "Did you sleep well?"

"Very well, thank you," Megumi said, returning his smile. "There were no interruptions last night, thankfully. I brought a late breakfast for you, if you haven't eaten already."

"Arigatou gozaimasu," her assistant said, bowing slightly as he took the box she offered him. "I hope it wasn't too much trouble for you."

"Nonsense," Megumi said, waving her hand dismissively. "I like to cook, so it's no problem for me. Has Fujita-san been by to check on his prisoner yet?"

"Not so far," Tatsuya said. "The prisoner seemed quiet when I checked on him a minute ago. Do you want me to send Fujita-san to you when he arrives?"

"Yes, please," Megumi said. "That stubborn officer likely will try questioning him again, and I want to make sure he doesn't push --"

She was interrupted by a knock on the doorframe, followed by a familiar voice --

"Oi, kitsune-onna... got a minute?"

Megumi glared at the tall man lounging in the doorway. "Not for anyone who insists on calling me 'fox-lady' I don't," she replied tartly.



Sanosuke returned her dirty look with a sly smile. "What if I say 'please?' " he said, his brown eyes twinkling mischievously.

Megumi stared at him silently, cursing the telltale thrum of desire his flirtatious behavior had set off in the pit of her stomach. \_Dammit... why the hell does he have to be so good-looking?\_ "That'd be a good start," she finally replied, her mouth pursed.

"If you'll excuse me, Megumi-sensei... I have some things to wrap up," Tatsuya said. He nodded to Sanosuke, who stepped aside to make room for Tatsuya to pass. "Good to see you again, Sagara-san."

"Oi, sensei... you can drop the -san. I'm no gentleman, as the fox-lady here probably told you already," Sano said with a grin. "Ja..."

Tatsuya smiled politely and exited. Megumi turned to face Sanosuke as he entered the room and shut the door. "All right, baka tori," she sighed, holding out her hand. "What have you done to it this time?"

"Eh?" Sano stared at her in confusion.

"Your hand," she said. "I'm assuming that's why you're here so early in the morning. Did you get into another drunken brawl last night and use that Futae-no-whatever again?"

Sano shook his head impatiently. "That's not it at all," he said, his eyes glinting. "Sorry to disappoint you. I know how much you must have been looking forward to... examining... me again."

"In your dreams," Megumi snapped, her cheeks flushed. "So... if it's not your hand... what else could possibly have gotten you out of bed before noon to come here?"

Sano's expression turned serious. "I want to talk about what happened when you left," he said. "There's some things... well, they've bothered me. They still do. And now that you're back, I figured it was a good chance to clear things up."

Megumi bit her lip nervously, looking at the floor. "I don't know if this is the best time to talk about it, Sanosuke," she said. "I'm supposed to be on duty... checking on patients, taking care of people. I know it might be hard for you to understand that, but --"

"Kuso! You haven't changed at all!" Sano burst in, his face flaming. "I know I'm not as smart as you, Megumi, but I do speak the same language, you know. So you say you're at work and can't talk... but I know you, and you're always at work. If now isn't a good time, then when the hell --"

"That's not true!" Megumi sputtered. "I am not always working! Why, just last night I had dinner with Ken-san and Kaoru-san..."

"...who's your patient now..." Sanosuke interrupted. "They invited you to dinner after you examined her, right?"

Megumi clenched her teeth, hating him for again showing more insight than she wanted to believe he was capable of. "So what?" she said, sounding a bit petulant.

"So... you were still working, that's what," Sanosuke said. "Anyway, if now's not a good time, tell me when would be."

\_Never!\_ she wanted to scream. The last thing she wanted to do was relive those few days before her departure for Aizu. But she recognized the look in Sanosuke's eyes, the determined set of his jaw. He wouldn't leave her in peace until she gave him what he wanted. She let loose a martyred sigh.

"Come back tonight, around 6," she said. "We can talk then."

"I'll be here," Sano said. "Thanks, fox- I mean... thanks, Megumi."

Blushing, Megumi met Sano's eyes again, more flustered by his effort to be nice to her than she'd been by his angry outburst. At just that moment, the door slid open --

"Ano... Megumi-san? I hope I'm not intruding --"

Misao froze, her cheerful smile vanishing as she saw Sanosuke standing within arm's length of Megumi, who was sitting and staring at him. And blushing. She felt her whole body go weak as Sano jumped away from Megumi, his face paling.

"Misao!" Sano took a step toward her. "Matte... it's not what you think..."

"Please... forgive me for disturbing you..." Misao managed to choke out before spinning around and darting out of the room... running smack into Tatsuya. The startled pair tumbled to the floor, lunch box and basins flying. When the dust had settled, Misao was mortified to discover she was sitting on top of the handsome young doctor, her kimono hiked up around her knees. She felt her face flame.

"Gomen nasai!" she sputtered, quickly scrambling off him. "I... didn't see you there... I'm so sorry..." As she crouched over to pick up the neatly wrapped box of mochi, a twinge of pain shot through her ankle, making her wince. Tatsuya immediately sprang to his feet.

"No, no... the fault was mine... I wasn't paying attention," he said, taking her hands and helping her stand. "And now I've hurt you. Is it your ankle?"

Misao nodded, biting her lip to keep from yelling in frustration as she carefully put her weight on the sore joint. \_Chikusho... won't this ever heal? Sano no baka... this is all your fault!\_

Tatsuya looked concerned. "Why don't you come with me?" he said. "I'll check your ankle... see that it's not broken."

Misao opened her mouth to say she was fine, that the pain was already gone... but she caught a glimpse of Megumi glowering at them from the office doorway... and Sano standing behind her, frowning, his narrowed eyes fixed pointedly on Tatsuya's hand, which was resting

lightly against Misao's back.

It was all Misao could do to keep from laughing in Sano's face. \_Oh, jealous, are you? Serves you right, baka-yarou! Now it's payback time...\_

Misao opened her eyes as wide as she could and fixed them on Tatsuya's face. "Oh, would you?" she asked, her voice rising an octave. "I'd be ever so grateful, sensei."

Tatsuya flushed slightly. "I'm not quite worthy of that title yet," he said, smiling sheepishly. "You can call me Tatsuya, Miss..."

Misao gasped, her mouth forming a small 'o' of surprise, which she deliberately covered with one hand. "Sumimasen! I'm Makimachi Misao," she said, bowing. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Tatsuya-san." She emphasized the word "pleasure," her lashes fluttering coyly as she gave him her brightest smile.

Tatsuya smiled in return. "The pleasure is mine, Makimachi-san," he said warmly. "Please follow me..."

She took a step forward, and let out a small cry. "Oh! It hurts," she said in a small voice, careful to keep from sounding too whiny.

"Here... let me help you," Tatsuya said, putting one arm around her and taking the box with the other. She leaned against him, noticing that he wasn't much taller than she.

"Arigatou, Tatsuya-san," she said in that sweet, breathless voice she'd often used on men in her thieving days. Combined with doe-eyes and a demure smile, it knocked them for a loop every time. \_Though most of them were stupid drunkards with no manners... Tatsuya-san seems much shyer... more gentleman-like... wonder if it'll affect him the same way?\_

Tatsuya smiled, studying her face appreciatively. Misao found herself blushing as he tightened his grip on her waist. \_Maybe not that shy after all...\_ "We'll get you fixed up in no time, Makimachi-san," he said, slowly escorting her into the nearest examining room.

"Please... call me Misao," she cooed, glancing over her shoulder. She allowed herself a small, victorious grin as she saw Sano's dark scowl and Megumi's reddened, furious face.

The sharp click of the exam room door sliding shut made Megumi and Sano jump.

"Outta my way, fox-lady," Sano said as he pushed Megumi aside.

"Chotto!" Megumi grabbed the back of Sano's jacket. "Just what are you planning to do, chicken-head?"

Sano snorted contemptuously. "Don't worry... your little prodigy's safe from me," he said. "The weasel girl's another story."

His comment set Megumi's temper flaring. "I can't believe her!" she exploded. "How dare she flirt so outrageously with him! In front of us, no less! It's... it's..."

"... exactly what you used to do with Kenshin to piss off Jou-chan," Sano interjected with a tight smile. "Works, doesn't it?"

"I don't know what you're taking about," Megumi spat, giving him a withering look. They both fell silent as the sound of laughter drifted from behind the closed door, followed by Misao exclaiming --

"Ooh, Tatsuya-san! That tickles..."

Megumi looked like she was about to throw something at the door when they heard Tatsuya's laughing reply --

"Sumimasen, Misao-san... what if I try it like this?"

Sanosuke cracked his knuckles as Misao let forth another peal of laughter, followed by a halfhearted protest --

"Now, Tatsuya-san... behave yourself! We barely know each other..."

Megumi fairly trembled with rage. "Ooh, that damned... little... minx!" she sputtered, stamping her foot. "I want her out of my clinic! Now!"

Sano hadn't stuck around to witness Megumi's tantrum. He stomped down the hall and shoved the exam room door open so hard the walls trembled.

Tatsuya was kneeling in front of Misao, who had her kimono parted at the knee, her sore ankle extended. Tatsuya had just finished wrapping her ankle, one hand resting on the bandage, the other cupping Misao's bare heel. Sano stared daggers at Misao, who responded with an innocent, wide-eyed gaze.

"Is something wrong, Sano?" she said in that same sweetly flirtatious tone.

Sano raised an eyebrow in response. He turned to Tatsuya. "Are you finished?" he asked the assistant doctor.

"H- hai," Tatsuya responded nervously, eyeing Sano's scowl and clenched fists. \_Maybe this wasn't such a good idea,\_ he thought, looking anxiously at Misao. She winked at him reassuringly.

"Good. Excuse us, then," Sano said abruptly, lifting Misao off the table and hoisting her over his shoulder. Her initial shock gave way to an outraged yell --

"Sano! What the hell do you think you're doing?" She beat her fists against his back. "Let me go, kono yarou!"

He tightened his grip on her legs with a triumphant smile. "All in good time, itachi-chan," he said. He glanced at Tatsuya, raising his voice to be heard over Misao's threatening tirade. "Thanks for taking care of her, sensei," he said, his pleasant tone in direct contrast

with the possessive gleam in his eyes. "But you might want to keep more of a professional distance next time. You follow me?"

Tatsuya bowed. "I understand, Sagara-san." He smiled politely at Misao, who strained to raise her head from where she hung against Sano's back. "Take care of that ankle, Makimachi-san."

"Chotto, Tatsuya-san! You have to help me!" she cried frantically.

Tatsuya looked at Misao, then up at Sano, then back down at Misao again. "I'm afraid there's nothing further I can do for you," he said apologetically. "Besides, I don't think he'll hurt you... ne, Sagara-san?"

Sano grinned at the smaller man. "Not much," he said, winking at him. "Ja, sensei." He strode out of the room and out of the clinic, whistling as his captive shrieked --

"DAMMIT! PUT ME DOWN THIS INSTANT, YOU ROOSTER-HEADED BASTARD! SAAAAA~NOOOOOO!"

Megumi raced to the window, a foxlike grin crossing her face as she watched Sanosuke carry the wriggling, shouting weasel girl down the street. \_I'd love to know what that baka tori plans to do with her. Once he releases her, he'll have quite a fight on his hands...\_

"Do you think she'll be all right, Megumi-sensei?" Tatsuya asked, his brow furrowed in concern. "I wasn't about to argue with an angry man twice my size... but..."

Megumi covered her lingering irritation with a reassuring smile. "There's nothing to worry about, Tatsuya-san. I've known Sano for a long time... he won't harm Misao-chan."

Tatsuya breathed a sigh of relief. "I had no idea she already had a suitor," he said, a trifle wistfully. "Though it shouldn't come as a surprise. She's very charming..."

Megumi suddenly felt as if something heavy was pressing down on her chest. "Yes," she managed to reply. "Misao-chan has always been a cheerful, lively girl."

"Indeed. And beautiful as well," Tatsuya said, turning away from the window. "I'm going to finish straightening the supply closet. Unless you need anything, Megumi-sensei?"

She shook her head, not trusting her voice. Tatsuya smiled pleasantly and walked away, leaving Megumi staring at the floor... cursing the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks. \_I'm such a fool... to think... to hope that...\_

She closed her eyes tightly, feeling the moisture seep out between her lashes.

\_Chikusho! Why did I come back here? Sanosuke no baka... this is all your fault!\_

.....

Sanosuke sneezed as he carried Misao up the stairs of an abandoned shrine at the edge of the city. She'd long since stop yelling for help and was planning exactly how badly she would hurt her abductor once he put her down. \_Let's see... I have four kunai in my obi... and I'm sure I can get at least one good kick in where it counts... that should put him out of action long enough for me to beat him senseless...\_

"You've been awfully quiet, weasel girl," Sano said cheerfully. "You must be plotting something."

"Yeah... your death..." she snarled. "Wait 'til I'm standing again... I'm gonna give you the ass-kicking of your life..."

"Oh, really?" Sanosuke said, chuckling. "I can hardly wait. In fact... why don't you start now? I could use the exercise."

He rolled her off his shoulder and set her on the ground. Misao reached inside her obi and grabbed her kunai... and promptly sank to her knees, her vision fogging.

"Ohhh," she groaned. "So... dizzy... what... why..."

Sanosuke was laughing so hard he had to lean against a tree for support. "Well, Misao... you might get your wish..." he gasped. "I just might die... laughing..."

"Urusai!" Misao tried to shout, but it came out sounding weak and whiny. "I will kill you... as soon as... I can stand up again." She lay back on the ground, fighting nausea. Sano wiped tears of hilarity out of his eyes as he walked up to Misao.

"Must've been all that time upside-down," he said, grinning. "You okay, itachi-chan?"

"No," she said, her lower lip protruding petulantly. Sano's grin widened as he knelt over her, flicking her lip with the tip of one finger.

"You look about five years old with your lip hanging out like that," he said as she slapped his hand away.

"Do that again and I'll bite your finger off," Misao said with some of her usual spirit.

Sano's grin turned wicked. "Maybe you'd like it better if I touched it like this..." he said, leaning in and kissing her before she could summon the strength to protest.

\_I'm hopeless,\_ Misao thought as she leaned up into the kiss, running her hands through his hair. \_All he has to do is kiss me and I forget what a complete jerk he's been...\_

\_I'm hopeless,\_ Sano thought as he scooped Misao off the ground and settled her on his lap, kissing her all the while. \_One kiss, and I forget what a devious little brat she's been...\_

He broke the kiss and whispered, "So, am I forgiven yet?"

Misao cocked her head. "I dunno," she said. "You were pretty mean to

me."

"You deserved it," he said, nuzzling her neck. "You're lucky I didn't spank you, Misao-chan."

His breath tickled her neck, making her giggle. "No... you're lucky you didn't spank me," she said, her breath catching as Sano's teeth grazed the sensitive skin below her ear. "I'd have had to really hurt you then."

"Sounds like fun," Sano smirked, inhaling deeply. "Mmm... you smell like mochi," he said, nibbling his way down her neck. "Taste like it, too."

Misao let out a sound somewhere between a chuckle and a moan. "I made some for Tae-san and Tsubame-chan," she said, her voice wavering as his kisses played havoc with her hormones. "Must've wiped my hand on my neck or something."

"Well, since I missed breakfast this morning... you don't mind if I have a little snack now, do you?" Sano murmured, pushing aside Misao's kimono to reveal part of her collarbone. She moaned softly as he trailed playful, nipping kisses across the exposed region.

"Mmm... your skin's so soft..." he whispered, pulling her kimono down further, revealing one pale shoulder. He grazed the skin there with his teeth, laved it with his tongue. "I wonder... does the rest of you taste this good, my beauty?"

"Sa- Sano," she gasped, tipping her head back, mind and body awash in pleasure. She struggled to maintain some semblance of reason. "Wait... we... we shouldn't..."

"Why?" he asked, kissing his way back to her neck, then catching her lips again. She responded as eagerly as ever, reaching inside his jacket to stroke his chest, his back. He drew back slightly, his lips so close she could feel them forming the words as he said --

"Tell me why we shouldn't, kirei..."

"Because..." she murmured.

"Because...?" he echoed, brushing her lips with his.

Her voice faltered. "Because... we're out in the open..."

"So? No one's here. No one ever comes up here." His whisper turned silky. "We could do anything we want... like..." He whispered a salacious suggestion in her ear, grinning as she slapped his shoulder.

"Sano!"

"Well, we could..."

"You shouldn't say such things." Misao turned her head away, her face scarlet.

Sano tipped her face back toward his. His eyes were nearly black,

they were so intense. "Tell me you haven't thought about it, Misao," he said in a voice as sweet and smooth as the mochi she'd made for lunch. "Tell me you don't want me to slip that kimono off your back right now..."

He slid one hand inside her kimono and down her back, making her gasp --

"...and kiss you..."

Her eyelids fluttered closed as he lowered his head, his breath warming the exposed skin just above the cloth binding her breasts --

"...everywhere..."

\_Kami-sama... I do... I do...\_ "Why are you doing this?" she cried, pushing him away from her and scrambling off his lap. "Are you trying to prove something? All right, I admit it -- I'm attracted to you, okay? Does that boost your ego? Does it make you feel good to have two women chasing after you? Now you can go back to Megumi-san and tell her what a man you are..."

"Huh?" Sano's arousal was swiftly doused by anger. "Chotto! What's that supposed to mean?"

"I think you know," Misao said icily, getting to her feet and pulling her kimono back into place with trembling hands.

Sano stared at her, his bewildered expression disappearing as he realized what Misao was intimating. "You... you think I'm playing around with both you and Megumi?"

"You said it, not me," Misao said, brushing off the back of her kimono. She yelped in surprise as Sano leapt to his feet, grabbing her arm and roaring --

"Dammit, Misao! You're just as bad as Jou-chan! If that's the kind of asshole you think I am... then I'll leave you alone from now on."

Misao's prim expression crumpled as she seized his sleeve with her free hand. "No! Don't... I mean... I don't know what to think," she said miserably as he glowered down at her. "I mean... the way you were with her this morning... and you've been acting so moody since she came back, but you won't tell me why. And... and you said yourself... that you... and she..."

Her voice trailed off as she turned away from him, too heartsick to go on. His anger faded in the face of her obvious distress. \_I know she wants me to tell her what happened with Megumi. Shikashi... I don't know if I can face her afterwards. What if she changes her mind about me?\_

Misao looked at Sano just as he turned away from her. \_He looks... ashamed? But why? Surely he didn't hurt her... of course not! He's not that kind of guy...\_

Sano flinched as Misao took his hand in her own. "Sano," she said quietly. "You listened to everything I had to say about Aoshi-sama,



and you didn't judge or look down on me for any of it. I'll make that same promise to you. Talk to me..."

"I'm afraid to," Sano blurted before he could stop himself. "It's not a pretty story, Misao. I'm afraid you... that you won't like me very much after I've told you."

"Try me," she said, smiling slightly. "I've forgiven far worse of others, I'm sure."

Sano stared at her, slowly returning her smile. "That's true, isn't it?" he said, tugging on Misao's hand and leading her to a nearby tree. They both sat down on the shady grass beneath its sweeping branches, continuing to hold hands while Sano exhaled once, sharply, and began --

"It happened right after the whole thing with Yukishiro Enishi... when Kenshin and Jou-chan announced their engagement..."

-- End of Chapter 13 --

## 15. These Changing Times

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^\_^;;

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**\*\*Chapter 15 -- The End of the Party\*\***

"A toast to Himura Kenshin and Kamiya Kaoru!"

A chorus of voices joined in what must have been Sanosuke's sixth toast of the engagement party, laughing and teasing Sanosuke and one another.

"Thank you all for coming to celebrate with us," Kenshin said for about the twelfth time, smiling fondly at Kaoru. She returned his loving gaze with her own starry-eyed, slightly lopsided smile. He chuckled, tapping her on the nose.

"You've had too much to drink, Kaoru-do--"

"Dame, dame, dame!" Kaoru exclaimed, putting her hand over Kenshin's mouth to cut him off. "No more '-dono!' You promised!"

Kenshin took her hand away, smiling sheepishly. "Maa, maa... be patient with me, Kaoru-do... Kaoru. It'll take a little practice to break the habit."

Sanosuke laughed, shaking his head. He couldn't help grinning like an idiot every time he looked at the happy pair. \_They deserve some happiness after the hell they've been through...\_

His good mood, however, was dampened every time he glanced over at Megumi. She sat in the midst of the boisterous revelry, eyes averted, face wistful. After smiling and congratulating Kenshin and Kaoru, she had withdrawn into herself, sipping her sake and avoiding looking at the blissful couple.

\_Dammit, fox... when are you gonna give it up?\_

Sanosuke sighed as he poured himself another drink, then walked over to where Megumi was brooding. "Oi, kitsune-sensei," he called cheerfully over the others' chatter, plopping down next to her. "You're way too quiet. Spoils the mood, you know?"

She smiled evilly at him. "We can't all be loudmouthed rooster-heads like you," she said in that familiar, sweetly sarcastic voice. "You're making enough noise for ten people..."

Sanosuke laughed good-naturedly, pleased that his gibe had roused the fox-lady from her gloomy solitude. "I suppose that's true," he said, flashing a grin. "Still, you should loosen up. This is a party, not a funeral."

Megumi flinched, then glared at Sano. "I'm as loose as anyone else here," she retorted, downing the rest of her sake and holding out her cup. Sano's grin turned suggestive as he refilled it.

"Really? That's good news for me... I like my women loose..."

Megumi snorted. "Hah! Too bad for you," she said, her nose in the air. "I prefer my men to be well-mannered... and employed."

Sano couldn't help chuckling at Megumi's well-placed insult. Despite the sting her words usually carried, he always enjoyed the process of coming up with an even more scathing retort. They continued their drinking and jab-laden flirting for awhile, pausing to laugh at Misao's verbal sparring with Yahiko and poke fun at Aoshi's seemingly impervious calm.

"And you thought I was wound too tight," Megumi said in a giggling undertone, her face flushed.

Sano grinned in response. "I'm surprised he chose to join us," he said, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "He's not exactly the partying kind."

They laughed some more... then Megumi suddenly stopped, looking stricken. Kenshin had lowered his head to say something to Kaoru, and she had responded by kissing him. The crowd erupted in whistles and

catcalls. Sano whooped, shouting --

"Go, Jou-chan!"

Megumi stiffened, then rose quietly. As the blushing couple separated, the doctor forced a smile and addressed them --

"Please excuse me," Megumi said. "I've had a bit too much to drink, and I have to be at the clinic early tomorrow. I'll say good night now."

Kaoru jumped up. "Thank you so much for coming, Megumi-san," she said taking Megumi's hands in hers. "It means a lot to Kenshin and to me."

Megumi's smile trembled. "Then I'm glad I came," she said brightly. "Thank you for inviting me. Oyasumi nasai."

As she picked her way through the crowd, Sanosuke jumped up. "Chotto, kitsune... I'll walk you home," he said, noting Megumi's unsteady gait. "It's late... you shouldn't be alone."

Megumi stared at Sanosuke, then shrugged. "Fine," she said.

The noisy party they left behind made the deserted streets of Tokyo seem even darker and quieter than usual. Megumi and Sanosuke walked in silence for awhile. Sano swallowed and broke the silence, asking Megumi in a gruff voice --

"Who do you think you're fooling, kitsune-onna?"

Megumi stared at him blearily, then waved at him dismissively. "As usual, you make no sense," she said.

Sano raised an eyebrow. "What, you too drunk to understand Japanese, fox?" he said. "I said -- just who do you think you're fooling? Congratulating Kenshin and Jou-chan like you're so happy they're getting married... then sulking for most of the party."

"S- sulking!" Megumi cried, lurching to a halt. "I was not... I would never..."

"You did," Sano said, nodding to emphasize his point. "Luckily, it didn't bring anybody else down... they were as rowdy a bunch as ever. And you did perk up toward the end... until the lovebirds started kissing."

Megumi dropped her haughty demeanor and eyed the ground. "I... I tried so hard to be... I mean... I want to be happy... for him, for them both... kedo..." She clenched her teeth and shut her eyes tightly to hold the tears at bay. Sano watched her silently, her obvious misery tugging at his heart.

A minute later she was sniffing and swiping at her eyes. "Chikusho," she growled. "This is why I don't get drunk... makes me too sentimental..."

"Maybe you should be," Sano said, all traces of teasing gone from his voice. "Maybe you need to stop being so damned strong and cry about it, Megumi. Maybe that's the only way to let it go."

She choked back a sob, keeping her head bent so her hair shielded her face from view. "I can't," she whispered. "Not... out here... like this..."

Sano swallowed over the lump that suddenly formed in his throat. \_Ah, hell... I wanna help you, kitsune... but you don't want my kind of help... so...\_

"Do you want me to go?" he said softly. "So you can be alone?"

Sano watched Megumi's body tremble slightly... heard her gasp... and nearly fell over from shock when she flung herself into him with a piteous wail.

"Don't," she sobbed, her hands clenching the folds of his jacket, her face pressed against his bare chest. "Don't go. Please... don't leave..."

Sano recovered quickly, carefully wrapping his arms around her. \_She's so soft... so warm...\_ "I won't," he said, feeling awkward and sad and aroused all at once. "It's okay, Megumi."

She cried for a few minutes as Sano held her, stroking her hair. He could hear her murmuring something as she cried, and lowered his cheek against the top of her head to better hear what she was saying --

"...it was hopeless all along, but I never stopped hoping..."

Megumi appeared unaware of his presence as she murmured that thought aloud. Sano tightened his arms around her, wishing -- as he always did -- that he knew what to say to her.

Immediately after Sano tightened his hold on Megumi, he sensed a change in her. She stopped crying and tensed slightly... then relaxed against him, her body soft and welcoming. \_Uh oh...\_

Megumi lifted her damp face to his. "Sanosuke..." she said, voicing an unspoken question with her eyes.

Sano swallowed, his body saying yes, his mind holding him back. \_Oh man... this isn't good, Sagara... you've both been drinking and she's been crying over another...\_

Megumi didn't wait for him to finish the thought. She pressed closer to him... stood on tiptoe... and kissed him.

Sano forgot everything and kissed her back, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other pressed against the small of her back. \_So good... I knew it would be, if we'd just let ourselves go...\_ He groaned against Megumi's lips, prompting her to part them, her tongue swirling seductively around his.

They broke the kiss simultaneously, their breathing ragged. "Megumi..." Sano said, cupping her face in his hands. "We shouldn't... not like this --"

She put her hand over his mouth. "Don't start thinking on me now, Sanosuke," she whispered. "Just feel." She took one of his hands from



much detail."

Misao shook her head, smiling reassuringly through the violent jealousy that had gripped her from the moment Sano had spoken of Megumi's kiss. "It's all right, Sano," she said. "Tell me as much as you need to. I can take it."

Sano eyed her doubtfully. "I know that look, itachi-chan," he said. "You're not gonna stick me with your kunai, are you?"

Misao forced a light laugh, which came out sounding as strained as she felt. Sano crossed his arms and looked at her knowingly through narrowed eyes. She sighed.

"All right, all right... so maybe I am a tiny bit jealous, okay?" She looked away from him, pouting. "Anyway, you're not the one I wanna stick a kunai in... so don't worry."

Sano laughed for real at that, a hearty sound that dissolved the heaviness in Misao's stomach. She glanced back at him, unable to keep from grinning. He tweaked her nose playfully.

"Shall I go on? Or are you more interested in target practice right now?" he said teasingly.

"You'd better keep talking, baka tori, or I will get my knives out," she retorted.

He held his hands up in a gesture of submission. "Say no more," he said. His teasing grin faded as he dove into his memories once more.

"You can probably guess what happened next. I tried to visit Megumi that afternoon at the clinic, but there had been an accident downtown... a carriage crashed into a crowd. There were a ton of hurt people, and she and Genzai-sensei were going nuts. I offered to help, but she said there was nothing I could do at that point... that it was better if I came back tomorrow, when things were calmer. She did thank me for the offer, but I still felt like she was relieved to have an excuse to be rid of me."

Misao watched Sano's face twist at the memory. She bit her lip, remembering how many times she'd felt the same way about Aoshi's behavior toward her.

"The next day I was busy helping Kenshin and Kaoru prepare for the wedding ceremony. While we were in town, they said we should visit Megumi. Kenshin said something about her needing to talk to us all, which was news to me. Apparently, she had stopped by early that morning on her way to the clinic to ask Kenshin to bring everyone there later on. The first part of what she had to say was hard enough to swallow... that in time, Kenshin would no longer be able to use Hiten Mitsurugi Ryuu.

"But as shocking as that was, it was the second announcement that really threw me... though when I think back on it, it shouldn't have..."

[illegible]

"I'm returning to Aizu," Megumi said quietly.

The four standing in front of her were speechless once more. Kaoru was the first to speak.

"When?" she asked, her voice just as quiet as the doctor's.

"As soon as I can," Megumi replied. "The doctor I'll be working with has sent a carriage... it should be arriving the day after tomorrow."

"Good," Kaoru sighed. "So you'll be at the wedding tomorrow, then."

Megumi smiled brightly at the younger woman. "Of course," she said warmly. "I wouldn't miss it, Kaoru-san."

Kenshin smiled. "We'll miss you, Megumi-dono," he said, his violet eyes kind. "But I suspect you're going back to Aizu for a reason."

Megumi's smile became radiant. Sano's stomach twisted painfully as it transformed her lovely face until she was almost unbearably beautiful. \_I've never seen her smile that way before... like it's truly from the heart...\_

"The doctor I'm meeting in Aizu is an old friend of my family. He says he's found my older brother," she said happily. "Apparently he's been studying in America, which is why we couldn't find him all these years. He's returning to establish a practice in Aizu... and he asked the doctor if there were any surviving members of his family still there."

"Oh, Megumi-san... that's wonderful!" Kaoru exclaimed, clapping her hands delightfully.

"It really is, Megumi-dono," Kenshin said, beaming. "He will be very happy to see you, no doubt."

"If he's half as happy as I am, it will be enough," Megumi said. "The doctor says he has a wife and children now... it will be good to meet them as well."

Sano finally spoke. "That doctor... he's the old guy who came to see you last month," he said gruffly. "Around the time the whole thing with Enishi started."

Megumi met his eyes, startled. "Yes," she said. "How did you know about that?"

"Sumanu... I was here to get my hand checked, and I overheard you talking with him," Sano said. "I didn't want to disturb you, so I left."

"You never told us about that," Kaoru said, cocking an eyebrow at both Sano and Megumi.

"Silly girl," Megumi replied reproachfully. "Considering the circumstances, it didn't seem important. And then, things happened so fast..."





time."

Misao grew serious. "So you didn't talk with Megumi until after the wedding?" she asked.

"Aa." Sano's brown eyes were somber. "I didn't want to deal with it until then. It was too important that I be there for Kenshin and Jou-chan."

Misao smiled, remembering the wedding. "You did everything just right, Sano," she said warmly. "It was a beautiful ceremony."

Sano smiled slightly, rubbing the back of his head. "You think so?" he said, sounding boyishly proud. "I was pretty nervous... but I guess it came out all right." His expression grew somber again. "I saw Megumi a few times at the celebration afterward at the Akabeko," he said, picking up the thread of his tale. "But I could never get close enough to talk to her. I saw her leave and tried to follow her, but I got sidetracked by Okon and Omasu. I figured I could catch up with her at the clinic later... so after the party died down..."

[illegible]

At the clinic, Sano found Megumi dozing in her office, her head pillowed on her arms, a pen dangling loosely from one hand. Sano saw that she hadn't bothered to change out of the deep green kimono she'd worn to the wedding... she'd merely thrown one of her doctor's smocks over it. For a moment he forgot his seething emotions and gazed at the peaceful image she made, wishing he didn't have to disturb her.

\_Shikashi... I have to. The wedding's over... and she's leaving tomorrow morning. Before she does... I have to know why...\_

He slowly approached her sleeping form, touching her shoulder and whispering --

"Oi, kitsune. Wake up..."

She mumbled something, turning away from him in protest. Sano exhaled in frustration and shook her gently.

"C'mon, Megumi..."

She awoke with a muttered curse. "What is it now?" she said, her voice heavy with sleep. "Another fight? You men... don't know the meaning of the word peace..."

Sano rolled his eyes. "Megumi," he said sharply. "Snap out of it. I'm not here for medical treatment."

She sat up then. "Sanosuke!" She hastily brushed her hair back with her fingers. "I... didn't hear you come in."

"Obviously," he drawled, folding his arms and leaning against the desk. "You made a pretty cute picture, sleeping like that. I almost didn't have the heart to wake you."

"I'm glad you did," she said, flustered. "I should be getting home

-- "

"Matte," Sano said, blocking her path as she began to rise from her chair. "We need to talk, Megumi."

Megumi stared at him, her face a mixture of annoyance and resignation. She sank back in her chair.

"I'd hoped we could avoid this," she said, giving him that imperious look he hated most. "Very well, then. Talk."

Sano stared at her, his temper rising. "Is that all you have to say?" he said angrily. "After what we... I mean... kuso, Megumi! What the hell's going on?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"The hell you don't!" Sano growled. "You and I spend the night together... you spend the next two days avoiding me... and then you tell me you're going to Aizu. Just like that!"

Megumi regarded him coolly. "Just like that," she echoed. "I hardly see your point, Sanosuke... which is nothing new. What exactly are you trying to say to me?"

Sano slammed his open palm down on the desk, making Megumi jump. "Dammit, fox!" he roared. "You're trying to piss me off now... so you don't have to answer me. But I'm not leaving until you tell me why!"

Megumi clenched her fists. "Why what?" she said, returning his furious stare with a toss of her head.

"Why didn't you tell me about Aizu before we... you know..." he said, ignoring her attempt to bait him. "If I'd known..."

"What?" Megumi asked, her face growing red. "What would it have changed, Sanosuke?"

Sano's anger faded into confusion. "I would have..." he faltered. "I mean... I wouldn't have... ah, hell, Megumi! I wouldn't have slept with you if I'd known your intentions!"

Megumi rose from her seat, her eyes flashing. "Oh, is that so?" she said heatedly. "That's bullshit and you know it! You couldn't have cared less what my intentions were! All you knew is I was drunk and lonely and looking for comfort... and you jumped at the chance to give it, didn't you?"

Sano's face flamed. "Don't even say I forced you," he hissed, his eyes glinting dangerously. "You couldn't wait to get your hands on me, you damned fox! I was willing to walk away... but you threw yourself at me... looked at me with those big sad eyes..." He raised his voice, mimicking hers. " 'Oh please, Sanosuke, don't go!' 'Come home with me, Sanosuke!' What else what I supposed to do?"

"If you were even half a gentleman you would've kept walking!" Megumi shouted, taking a step toward him. "You knew I'd been drinking... that I wasn't myself! You know very well I wouldn't have done any of those things if I'd been sober!"

Sanosuke stared at her for a moment, then smiled slightly. "Oh, really?" he said, his voice dropping an octave. "So you're saying that the sake made you do it?"

"You know it's true!" she said, stamping her foot in frustration.

Sano took a step toward her. "So let's see," he mused, his eyes locked on hers. "The sake made you throw yourself into my arms..."

"Yes!" Megumi spat.

He took another step toward her. "And it made you press your body against mine..." he said, his voice like satin.

The faintest glimmer of uncertainty shot through the righteous anger in Megumi's eyes. "That's right," she said, her voice somewhat less venomous.

Sanosuke stopped directly in front of Megumi, scant inches separating them. "And it made you kiss me," he murmured, watching her closely as she swallowed nervously.

"Y- yes," she said haltingly, her eyes darting away from his.

"So," Sanosuke went on in a silken whisper, "if I were to try to kiss you now, while you're sober -- you'd say no, right?"

Megumi trembled, but held her ground. "Of course," she said, her voice wavering.

" 'Of course?' " Sano repeated, mimicking the waver in her voice. "You don't sound too sure of that." He ran his index finger down her cheek, feeling his body come alive as she shivered. He crooked the finger under her chin, lowering his head to hers.

"Tell me you don't want me to kiss you," he whispered, watching through half-closed eyes as she licked her lips. "Tell me and I'll go."

"I... I don't..." Megumi's voice trailed off as she stared at his lips hovering inches from hers.

"Yes? You don't..." Sanosuke prompted, stroking the underside of her chin.

"...don't want..." She tipped her head back to meet his eyes.

"What don't you want, Megumi?" He rested his other hand on her hip, drawing her closer.

"I don't want you... to..." Her eyes dropped to his mouth again.

"To what?"

Megumi drew a shaky breath... cursed... and pulled his head to hers, kissing him hard. Sano growled low in his throat, pulling her hips up against his. She thrust against him, biting his lip, murmuring into

his mouth --

"Damn you to hell, Sanosuke..." She roughly shoved his black gi off his shoulders as he lifted her up and sat her on her desk.

"Fine by me..." he replied roughly, pulling at the ties on her smock, ripping one in his haste. "Hell's a small price to pay for another taste of heaven." He bit her neck, then whispered in her ear

--

"Tell me you want me, Megumi."

Megumi moaned softly as his teeth worried her earlobe.

"Tell me," Sanosuke whispered more harshly as he ripped her smock open, revealing her green kimono.

"I... n- no," Megumi gasped, pushing him away and scrambling off the desk. "This... isn't fair, Sanosuke. Taking advantage of my loneliness this way..."

Sano's eyes narrowed. "Taking advantage of you?" he said sharply. "Is that how you see it? So... what you're saying is you would've slept with anybody who'd shown you a little kindness that night. I just happened to be the lucky one."

Megumi's eyes glowed red. With a snarl, she slapped Sano's face. "How... dare... you!" she shrieked. "I never said that! That's not what I meant at all!"

"Oh, so you did want me," Sano said with a nasty grin. "Which is it, Megumi? Was it the sake or your choice? Was it because you were lonely or because you wanted to be with me?"

"I hate you," Megumi hissed. "I wish we'd never touched, you coarse, unfeeling bastard!"

"And I wish I'd never laid you, you bitch," he snarled. "You're not worth the trouble."

Megumi howled with rage, throwing herself at Sanosuke, her hands curled into claws. She tried to scratch Sano's face, but he grabbed her hands and held her at bay, laughing derisively at her.

"My, my... the kitsune shows her true colors. I'm sure the men will be beating down your door in Aizu."

Megumi bared her teeth and threw up a knee, aiming for Sano's groin. He grinned as he twisted to avoid her kick, ending up behind her, one arm wrapped around her stomach, the other pinning both her hands behind her back. She strained against his grasp, letting loose a stream of curses that made Sano's grin even wider.

"If you say you're sorry, I might let you go," he said with a chuckle.

"Fuck you," she snarled.

Sano laughed, squeezing her waist. "Is that a request?"

"Ooh... you... you..."

"You know what I like best about you, fox? Your way with words," Sano said, burying his face in her hair. "Mmm... too bad your temper's not as sweet as your perfume. I've always loved your scent, you know."

Megumi suddenly stopped fighting him and relaxed, sinking back against him, her breathing labored. He forgot his anger... his humiliation... everything as his body surged in response. He went on, lowering his voice to a smooth whisper --

"I love it when you let go like this... when you drop that prissy, bitchy front and let yourself be a woman." He let go of her hands, half expecting her to break free. She didn't. He looped his other arm around her, pulling her closer, wanting her to feel his arousal. Her breath caught as his hands wandered up to cradle her clothed bosom.

"I want you, Megumi," he said. "I'm not afraid to let you know that. But I won't let you pin this all on me. You want me too... I can feel it... and I want to hear you say it."

Her hands closed around his, coaxing him to squeeze her breasts harder. "Sanosuke..." she breathed.

"Yes..."

She guided his hands to the neckline of her kimono, nudging them under the layers of fabric. "I want you..."

He slipped his hands inside, put his lips to her ear. "Say it again," he murmured.

She moaned as he fondled her, sliding one arm up around his neck and digging her fingers into his hair. "I want you," she growled, her other hand reaching behind to stroke him. "I want this."

He turned her around to face him, whispering --

"Then let me give you what you want, lovely fox..."

.....

Afterwards, Megumi quickly rose, donning her discarded kimono. "I should be going," she said, fumbling with her obi. "I still have some packing left to do."

Sano watched her through narrowed eyes, making no move to retrieve his own clothing. "So... that's it?" he said. "That's all you have to say? 'It was nice knowing you, Sano... now I'm off to Aizu?'"

Megumi glanced back at Sano, lounging naked on the floor. "You'd better get dressed... someone might come in and see you," she said, her voice even.

"At this time of night? Not likely," Sano said, rising to his feet. "Megumi..."

She held up a hand. "Don't," she said sharply. "Just get dressed and don't say a word... not until I'm finished." She smoothed the front of her kimono and picked up her smock as she continued talking  
--

"Sanosuke... I know we have a certain... chemistry... together. But that's all there is between us. So when you ask me if that's it... well... that's my answer." She examined the torn ties on her smock, then folded it over her arms.

"I know what you're saying," Sano said as he tucked his gi into his hakama. "And I know we fight a lot and don't have much in common. But..."

"But what? I'm leaving for Aizu in the morning," Megumi said. "And don't say you'll come with me. It would never work. Believe me, it's better if we just leave things as they are."

"What if I don't want to?" Sano protested, his voice rising.  
"Megumi..."

"Please, Sanosuke... for once, just let me go peacefully," Megumi said, turning toward the door.

Sano picked his haori up off the floor and grabbed her arm. "I can't do that..."

She tensed, sighing in exasperation, and turned to face him again. "This is exactly why we could never work together!" she snapped, her eyes flashing angrily. "You have no respect or consideration for anybody else... all you care about is pleasing yourself! You're selfish... stupid... lazy... ill-mannered... ambitionless. You're the last man in the world I'd consider for a lifetime partner!"

Sano felt his face go white, then red. "Man, you don't pull your punches, do you, fox?" he said, tightening his grip on her arm.

"You never let me," she said, trying to pull away from him. "Let me go... you're hurting me..."

"No," he said in an icy, calm voice. "Not until I've had my say." His voice rose as he went on "You say I'm selfish, stupid, lazy and all that... well, I'd rather be all those things than a high-minded, snotty, nasty harpy like you! I've never seen someone with so much compassion for strangers... and so little for the people she's supposed to care about! Or someone so eager to push away anybody who shows her that he cares about her!"

"That is not true!" Megumi hissed. "Just because I'm not fawning all over you doesn't mean I wouldn't welcome the same feelings from a different man."

Sano dropped her arm. "As usual, it all comes back to Kenshin," he said, his voice dripping with disgust. "Fine. I guess you'd rather spend the rest of your life pining for someone you never stood a chance with... than take a chance on someone who's available and willing to --"

"You think you know so much about me," Megumi interrupted coldly, her

eyes blazing. "You know nothing. I've accepted that Ken-san has chosen Kaoru-san. But it doesn't mean I don't still love him, and it doesn't mean I don't still want someone like him for a husband someday. Ken-san is my ideal: strong... compassionate... wise... giving. And as I watched him marry that tanuki-girl today I swore to myself that I won't settle for anyone who's less than he is."

Sanosuke could hear the blood pounding in his ears. "I suppose you mean me," he said, his face flaming.

Megumi gave Sanosuke a withering look as she went on in a scathing tone --

"Oh, yeah... you're great husband material. A foul-mouthed, freeloading, chicken-headed gambler who thinks the best things in life are sex, sake and kicking ass. You've been that way since the day I met you... and you'll be that way until the day you die. And there's no way I'm sticking around to watch you wallow in the gutter. What self-respecting woman would?"

"I don't recall asking you to, you stuck-up bitch!" Sanosuke shouted, heading for the door. "Kuso! Go to Aizu in your fancy carriage... I hope I never see you again!"

"The feeling's mutual!" Megumi retorted as he slammed out of the clinic and into the street. He shoved his hands in his pockets and began walking briskly, knowing that in his present mood, there was only one place for him to go... the worst neighborhood in Tokyo, where he was sure to find some cheap sake, a willing woman and at least a couple dozen idiots looking for trouble.

Megumi's words ran through his head, mocking him. He clenched his teeth, his eyes glinting ferally.

\_Guess I'm proving you right, huh, fox? Ah, hell... like it matters... to you... or anyone else...\_

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

"I guess I kinda went crazy for a few days after that," Sanosuke said, staring into the distance. "I don't remember much... just lots of drinking and fighting. Kenshin and Katsu finally dragged me out of a gambling den one night and beat some sense into me... and then things went pretty much back to normal."

Sano looked over at Misao. "So... that's pretty much it," he said nervously. "You've been really quiet, Misao. Are you upset? Mad at me?"

Misao met his anxious gaze calmly. "There's one thing that doesn't make sense to me," she said.

"Nani?"

Misao leaned over and gently brushed Sano's cheek with her hand. "Why do you care so much what she thinks of you?" she said, her fingers lingering against his jawline. "You weren't in love with her, were you?"

Sano covered Misao's hand with his own. "I don't think so," he said softly. "I thought at one point that I might... I could be... but not anymore." He closed his eyes, murmuring --

"She was right about me, you know. That's what bugs me the most... that she was right about what a loser I was... and still am."

"Bullshit!" The vehemence in Misao's tone made Sano's eyes snap open in surprise. She squeezed his hand, glaring at him fiercely. "I'm not gonna sit here and listen to you say those things about yourself."

"Why not?" Sano said glumly, sinking back against the tree. "What part of what she said wasn't true? I still drink and fight a lot... I still gamble... I don't have a job... I'm always sponging meals off you guys..."

Misao turned her hands upward in a conceding gesture. "Okay, maybe all that's true," she said. "But Sano, if those things bother you, you can change them. You don't have to drink or brawl or gamble... and if you want to get a job, then get one. You know a lot of people... one of them's bound to know of a job that'll suit you."

She leaned closer to him again. "What's not true is the rest of what Megumi said," she said, her eyes lingering on his. "You're not lazy or stupid... and you're certainly not selfish. You're smart and resourceful... you're good at fixing things... you've helped a lot around the doujou... even Kenshin's said so." Her voice became softer. "And you've been such a good friend to me..."

The shame Sano's memories had stirred up within him dissipated, replaced by the breathtaking wonder he was beginning to feel more strongly each time he was with Misao. He reached out to touch her face, whispering --

"Misao... all those things... the person I've been lately... it's because of you."

Misao opened her mouth, a protesting look on her face. Sano silenced her with a finger to her lips, murmuring --

"It's true. You bring out the best in me, kirei."

"Sano..." Misao whispered as their lips met once more.

.....

Aoshi walked slowly down the path leading to the old shrine, taking care to walk as silently as possible over the fallen leaves. It reminded him of the old onmitsu training game he'd used to play with Misao when she was little. She'd sit on a stump in the woods and he would try to sneak up on her. It was great practice for him, and Misao was equally delighted whether she caught him or he was successful in escaping her notice. He almost smiled, remembering her cheerful, cherubic face... her adoring voice... her frequent, unabashed hugs...



\_Aoshi-sama! Wai, Aoshi-sama... you did it! You're the Oniwabanshoo's best!\_

\_Hah! Aoshi-sama... I caught you! I'm a good listener, ne?\_

Aoshi sighed inwardly. Usually, meditation brought him a respite from memories like this... but lately, his thoughts were turning to Misao more and more frequently, especially after his morning meditations. He'd hoped the solitude of the forest near the abandoned shrine would help restore his focus... renew his zeal for the original purpose of his visit to Tokyo... but...

A faint murmuring sound caught his attention. He froze, instinctively reaching for the kodachi sheath on his back... then relaxed, realizing it was the sound of voices in the distance. \_So much for abandoned... I guess I'm not the only one who knows about this place after all.\_ He approached quietly, not wanting to startle whoever it was. As he rounded a bend, two figures came into view... and as he drew closer, he recognized both of them.

\_Sagara and Misao... what are they doing here?\_

Aoshi paused behind a tree, his eyes going wide as he watched Misao raise her face to Sanosuke's... her lips meeting his in a searching, sensual kiss...

-- End of Chapter 15 --

## 16. These Changing Times

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshoo onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^\_^;;

**\*\*Note:\*\*** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

**\*\*Chapter 16 -- Choosing Paths\*\***

Since the time he'd returned to the Aoiya after the battle with Shishio, meditation had served as both comfort and refuge for Aoshi... much as his kata had after the deaths of his Oniwabanshoo comrades. When he was meditating, he felt nothing... thought nothing.

It brought him to a peaceful place where his past mistakes didn't exist, freeing him from their consequences. Freeing him from the stab of guilt he felt every time he saw Okina wince with pain as he reached overhead to pull dishes from a shelf, exposing the scars along his arms. Freeing him from the aching remorse he felt every time he caught Misao gazing wistfully at him, her eyes expressing a longing as powerful as any battle aura he'd ever felt.

But today, even the comfort of meditation wasn't enough to rid himself of the nagging vision of Misao and Sanosuke together at the old shrine... kissing and caressing each other with a familiarity that indicated it wasn't the first time they'd touched in that way.

His eyes snapped open as he expelled a breath he wasn't even aware of holding, ruffling the bangs that obscured his face. \_What did I expect... that she would pine for me forever? I wanted her to move on... forget about me. I did everything I could to make that happen. And now she has. I should be happy for her... wish her well... but...\_

His hands tightened around his knees as his normally disciplined thoughts took a wayward turn... conjuring up memories of that fateful night outside the Aoiya months ago. He trembled slightly as he remembered how it had felt to hold Misao's hand gently in his... run his fingers over her satin-smooth cheeks... caress her soft, slightly moist lips. It had been sheer madness, to touch her like that. Something had come over him when he'd caught her practicing her kata that night... her movements strong and graceful, her face serene. He'd watched her silently from the shadows, captivated by this beautiful stranger who bore only a passing resemblance to the Makimachi Misao he'd practically raised from infancy.

He'd known the moment Misao realized he was watching her, and in that split-second exchange of auras, he'd felt himself returning her longing. The feeling had only grown as they'd practiced... and when she'd taken his hand, his ever-present resistance to her had nearly vanished. For those few moments after her innocent touch, he'd allowed himself to imagine the unthinkable -- his lips on hers... his hands in her silken hair... his body pressed against her supple, inviting frame...

It had been terrifying, to come so close to losing control. Thankfully, he'd returned to himself just in time, though he would have given anything to take back the deliberate cruelty of the words he'd spoken to her as she lay weeping on the ground. He'd gone to Osaka at dawn to complete some Oniwabanshuu business -- but had then stayed for a few months at a nearby monastery, trying to reestablish that careful distance with which he'd held Misao at bay for so long. How surprised he'd been to return to Kyoto, ready to face her... only to find she was in Tokyo visiting the Himuras. When he asked Okina how she was faring there, the old man had given him a long, measuring stare, then handed him a letter.

"Read for yourself," Okina said.

The letter had been typically Misao -- cheerful and breezy and messily written, as if her thoughts came so fast she hardly had time to capture them in paper and ink. She was fine, the Himuras were fine, the weather was good, she was training every day. It told him

nothing. He'd been grateful when Saitou's summons arrived because it gave him an excuse to check on Misao, find out for himself if she was truly all right.

He hadn't expected to find her with another man. Not so soon, anyway.

\_And of all men... why on earth did she choose Sagara Sanosuke? He's brash... crude... reckless... completely without discipline or ambition...\_

A sly voice inside him added --

\_He's also young... handsome... filled with life...\_

Aoshi's jaw clenched reflexively as he recalled Sagara pulling Misao on top of him in the midst of their kiss... his hand moving slowly up Misao's exposed calf... her warm laugh as she slapped it away, saying something in a half-laughing, half-scolding tone... the surge of frustrated, possessive rage that welled within him as he watched Sagara cut her off with another bold kiss...

He stood up suddenly, silently berating himself --

\_Enough... whatever I think or feel is irrelevant. I have no right to her. I lost all rights I had when I broke my promise to Sorata-san... and slaughtered Okina in front of her eyes...\_

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the wall, trying to push away the image of Misao's shocked face, splattered with the blood of her beloved surrogate grandfather. He could never undo that horror... or the hell she'd suffered afterwards... all because of his selfishness. His thoughts turned bitter --

\_Who am I to judge Sagara, or any other man she should choose? Sagara is far more deserving of her than one who allied himself with devils like Takeda Kanryuu and Shishio Makoto... who made choices he knew would bring pain and death to those he swore always to defend. And he's certainly better for her than the one who has deliberately broken her heart time and again...\_

But even as he admonished himself, Aoshi grabbed his kodachi sheath and headed for the door. He had to meet with Saitou first... then he would find Sagara and determine his intentions toward Misao. It was his duty, after all... to Misao... and to her dead father.

\_This time for sure, Sorata-san... I promise I won't allow her to be hurt again. Not by me... or anyone else...\_

.....

Misao sighed, rising from where she lay pillowed against Sano's chest. "I have to go," she said. "I have to make sure everybody gets lunch, then change for practice with Unmei-sensei --"

Sano grabbed her around the waist and pulled her down on top of him again, eliciting a small shriek of protest from Misao. He kissed her in the middle of her scolding, smiling against her mouth as she easily gave in, moaning low in her throat, her tongue darting and weaving around his. He rolled over, pinning her beneath him, his

breath catching as she willingly parted her thighs enough for his leg to slip between hers. They writhed against each other as his lips traveled hungrily down her neck... to the bit of skin exposed by her disheveled kimono... stopping at the bandages binding her breasts.

"Damn these bandages," Sano muttered, pressing his forehead against her chest. "Thank kami-sama for these bandages..."

"I know exactly what you mean," Misao said shakily, stroking his hair. "Sano... we really should go."

"Aa," Sano grunted, rising to his knees, his face red. "Sumanu, Misao..."

Misao rolled up to a sitting position, pressing her fingertips to his lips. "Iie, Sano," she said firmly. "Don't apologize to me. Not for this. I wanted you to..." Misao's voice trailed off, her face burning.

Sano embraced her, breathing into her ear --

"I know, kirei."

Misao hugged him back fiercely. "I don't care about Megumi-san or any of that," she whispered. "I still want you, Sano. It's like this aching inside me... and it grows more every day..."

Sano groaned softly as he kissed her temple. "I know... I feel it, too..." he murmured, drawing back from her, marveling at the yearning he saw in her beautiful eyes.

"Misao," he said, his voice low. "I want to see you tonight. After dinner. At my place. Will you come?"

Misao wasn't prepared for the tempest of emotions Sano's request raised within her. \_Oh, I want to... so much. But... I'm still not sure... I mean... what if I change my mind after we...? What if \_\_he\_\_ changes his mind? I would be so humiliated...\_

Sano smiled ruefully as he watched her eyes grow dark with confusion and anxiety. "Forget it," he said, kissing her forehead. "Your body may be saying yes, but your eyes tell me you're not ready."

"No, Sano... I want to --" Misao protested, only to be cut off by a brief kiss.

"Don't, kirei," Sano murmured, cupping her face in his hands. "It's okay. I told you I'd wait for you... and I meant it. Don't push yourself."

Misao wanted to cry from relief... from frustration... from feelings she couldn't yet name. "Sano," she said, looking away from him. "I know you might need... I mean... it's okay if you need to... be with someone else. I know it's harder for men to wait..."

Sano stared at her in disbelief, then smirked slightly. "I appreciate the thought, babe," he said, his eyes glowing possessively as he took her hands in his. "But... I don't want anyone else. I haven't since you came back to Tokyo..."

Misao's stomach did a somersault. "H- honto?" she stammered, silently wondering if her face had reached the shade of Sano's headband yet.

"Honto," Sano replied, smiling devilishly and kissing the tip of her nose. His voice grew husky as he went on --

"I don't want to settle for anyone less than you, Misao..."

Misao felt her throat tighten. "I... Sano, I'm not really that special," she managed to choke out.

Sano shushed her, brushing his lips over hers once more... then tapped her under the chin. "C'mon, itachi-chan... let's go eat some of that mochi," he grinned. "I'm starved."

Misao stared at him, dumbfounded... then chuckled, shaking her head. "You're a hard one to figure out, Sagara," she said gruffly as she rose to her feet, brushing the dust off her kimono and straightening it.

"Not really," Sano said, winking at her as he watched her tighten her obi. "A little food... a little sake... a little cuddling... that's all I need to keep me happy."

"You forgot the part about kicking ass," Misao said dryly, adjusting the comb holding her coiled braid in place.

Sano flashed his most suggestive grin as he rose to his feet. "I'd rather be grabbing ass than kicking it," he drawled, squeezing her rump for emphasis.

As he expected, Misao kicked him in the shins. But as he bent over exaggeratedly, mock-yelping in pain, she grinned evilly. "Two can play at that game, rooster-boy," she retorted, giving his rear a hard pinch that made him jump and howl with genuine agony.

"Oi, that really hurt!" he whined, pouting and rubbing his offended buttock. "All right, all right... truce?"

Misao smiled triumphantly. "For now," she said, winking at him as she began making her way down the stairs. Sano watched her for a minute, admiring the graceful swing of her hips as she effortlessly navigated the roughly hewn steps in spite of her constricting clothing.

\_Damn... Sagara, I think you've finally met your match...\_

He resumed his cheerful whistling as he loped down the steps after her.

.....

Saitou was putting on his police cap as Aoshi entered his office. "I'm glad you're here," Saitou said. "I want you to come with me to the clinic to interrogate the prisoner."

"Why?" Aoshi said, raising one eyebrow slightly. "Surely you don't need my help."

Saitou smirked. "It's more likely you need mine at this point," he said. "You do realize that right now you're my prime suspect in the attack?"

Aoshi was unperturbed. "As I was telling Misao yesterday, it's a logical assumption," he said calmly. "Are you going to place me under arrest?"

"Not yet," Saitou said, frowning. \_Such self-control... any other man would at least protest his innocence a little,\_ he thought with grudging admiration. "I'd like the prisoner to have a look at you first," he went on. "Once he sees you, I should be able to tell within a few seconds whether you're his assailant or not."

"Fine --" Aoshi began, but was interrupted by a frantic yell.

"Fujita-san! Fujita-san, come quick! Umari is..."

"Chikusho," Saitou growled as he and Aoshi bolted down the hall.

.....

"Oi, Sano," a voice called from behind Sanosuke and Misao. Sano grinned as he turned to greet its owner.

"Yo, Katsu. What brings you out with the crowds?"

"Looking for you," the dark-haired man said, glancing at Misao. Sano nodded slightly, his smile becoming wider as he rested his hand briefly on Misao's shoulder.

"Makimachi Misao, meet Tsukioka Katsuhiko, a former Sekihoutai and a good friend of mine."

"Hajimemashite," Misao said, bowing in greeting. Katsu nodded and, without a word, studied her intently. Misao fidgeted under his scrutiny, her polite demeanor dissolving. Finally, she could stand it no longer --

"Mou!" she sputtered. "Do I have something on my face or what?"

Sano burst out laughing, while Katsu started and bowed gracefully. "Gomen nasai," Katsu said. "I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that I'm an artist... and your eyes... I've never seen eyes quite that color before. They're extraordinary."

Misao blushed deeply. "Arigatou gozaimasu," she said. Katsu smiled slightly and nodded in Sano's direction.

"I hope he doesn't give you too much trouble, Makimachi-san."

Misao raised an eyebrow at her grinning companion. "No more than he gives anyone else," she said wryly. "Please excuse me... I really must be going. Sano, should I set some lunch aside for you?"

"That'd be great, Misao... thanks," he replied. "I'll see you at dinner, then?"

"Of course," she said, bowing again in Katsu's direction. "It was very nice meeting you, Tsukioka-san."

"The pleasure was mine," Katsu said, returning her bow.

Misao smiled wordlessly, turning away from the two men and heading down the street. Katsu watched her walk away... emitting a long, low whistle as soon as she was out of earshot.

"Now I know why I haven't seen much of you lately," Katsu said, slapping Sano on the back.

Sano's grin turned cocky. "So, you approve?" he said. "I'm surprised. I didn't think you liked women much."

"I don't," Katsu said with a sly smile. "She's... different, though. Your taste has improved tremendously. Where did you meet her?"

"Long story," Sano said. "To make it short, we met in Kyoto during that whole Shishio mess, and we got reacquainted when she came back to Tokyo awhile ago." His voice turned eager. "You really liked her?"

"Not nearly as much as you do, it seems," Katsu said, amused.

"Good answer, baka-yarou," Sano said, flashing another grin before glancing around at the bustling streets. "You've got information for me, ne? We should probably go someplace quieter."

"Agreed. Let me buy you a drink," Katsu said, his face darkening. "You'll need one after you hear what I have to tell you."

.....

Megumi finished recording the results of Tae's latest exam and blew on the page to set the ink. She smiled, remembering how the young businesswoman's eyes had shone after Megumi told her she could return home in the morning. Genzai-sensei had been wise to keep Tae at the clinic while her ribs healed, especially in light of the threats she'd finally confessed to receiving from the yakuza that had robbed the Akabeko. \_I hope it's safe to send her home now... but the police did say they'd watch out for her while those thieves are still on the loose.\_ She shivered. \_I hope they're caught soon! It makes me nervous, being around here alone... especially in the evening...\_

She grew sober as her thoughts turned to Sanosuke. He'd always looked out for her in the past, checking in on her when she worked late and making sure she got home safely at night. Being fiercely independent, she'd usually given him a hard time, yelling at him and chasing him away. Finally, he took the hint and stopped watching over her... or so she thought. Little did she know he'd just started shadowing her instead. She winced as she remembered the night she caught him in the act -- she'd given him her usual tongue-lashing, and he'd yelled back at her --

\_... Fine then! Why don't you go back to pretending you can take care of yourself, and I'll go back to pretending I don't care? ...\_

He'd stomped off then, muttering something about stubborn, nasty-tempered foxes... and she'd headed home, feeling lonely and -- as always -- guilty for being so mean to him. It was like a reflex she couldn't control... though she knew deep down that she chose not to control it to keep Sanosuke from getting too close to her.

She sighed, closing the record book and rubbing her eyes. \_No matter how hard I tried to run him off, he always came back for more. I guess what happened between us was inevitable...\_

Bittersweet memories of that last week in Tokyo flooded her mind, setting her cheeks aflame. The finality of Kenshin's marriage to Kaoru, and her own decision to leave Tokyo, had been difficult enough to deal with... throwing Sanosuke into the mix had been sheer insanity on her part. She couldn't even count the number of times she'd cursed herself for succumbing to his roguish charms... twice, by all that was holy! What had she been thinking?

That infuriatingly irrational voice inside her piped up --

\_You weren't thinking at all... Sanosuke always tends to have that effect on you. Take that dream you had last night, for instance...\_

Megumi shook her head briskly, trying to clear out the images the voice had conjured. But it was hard to resist the warm, pleasant feelings they invoked. She couldn't help smiling, remembering how after their first time together, she'd teased him that he'd nearly lived up to all his boasting about his prowess as a lover. His response had been typically Sanosuke... a cocky grin... a low laugh... and a murmured assurance that she hadn't even experienced half of what he had to offer her. Then he'd demonstrated the truth of that statement... to dizzying effect.

She bit her lip and shoved the record book aside. \_Dame! This is pointless... whatever was between us is long gone.\_

The rebel voice snickered knowingly. \_Really? Is that why your heart races every time he turns his attention on you?\_

Megumi silently ordered her errant brain to shut up. \_All right... I'll admit I still find him... attractive. But nothing else has changed. We can't spend our whole lives in bed... and outside of that, we still have nothing in common. And he's still the same baka-yarou I left two years ago in Tokyo... shiftless and jobless...\_

She winced as she remembered the day she departed for Aizu. After her last, terrible fight with Sanosuke, she'd bitterly regretted some of the things she said. But she refused to apologize, thinking it was better for him to hate her... that he would forget her sooner that way. Better to eliminate all possibility of him showing up in Aizu... so that her new life could proceed in peace.

She hadn't counted on missing her old one.

Despite her joyous reunion with Ryuen and the hard work that had followed, those first weeks in Aizu had seemed so... empty. She missed the squabbling and the laughter that had characterized life at



Kamiya Doujou. Her brother's family helped fill that gap somewhat, accepting her with open arms and inviting her to eat with them regularly... but being with them often served to sharpen the loneliness of the solitary apartment she returned to every night near the medical school they'd just opened. And though she met a lot of men through her work and her brother and their friends, not one of them had even come close to measuring up to the standards she'd set.

\_Well... maybe one...\_

She shook her head sharply again, growling in frustration. There was no use entertaining that thought. Better to save her mental energy for finishing these reports... then she could head for Kamiya Doujou to check on Kaoru. She was bearing up well under her restrictions, but she could tell the strain was beginning to wear on the girl. The babies seemed fine, though, and that was the only thing that mattered to all of them.

A soft rap on the office door interrupted her thoughts. She glanced at the clock on the wall. \_It's way too early for Sanosuke... and Tatsuya-san would've announced himself by now...\_

She stood hastily, her manner immediately shifting to that of the strong, capable physician. "Come in," she said, smoothing the front of her smock.

To her surprise, the door slid open to reveal Misao, wearing her Oniwabanshuu uniform and a nervous expression. Megumi couldn't help staring, still floored by the tall, lovely young woman the scrawny little weasel girl had become. \_Gods! What a transformation. I'll never get used to the way she looks now... even in flat sandals she's as tall as I am! It's unnerving...\_

Megumi quickly recovered her outward poise. "Konnichiwa, Misao-san," she said politely. "What can I do for you? Do you need medical attention?"

Misao bit her lip, shifting from foot to foot, then looked Megumi straight in the eyes.

"Actually... I'm here to talk to you, Megumi-sensei," she said. "Do you have a moment?"

Megumi stared at the young ninja. \_What on earth could she possibly have to say to me? Unless... she wants to apologize for this morning...\_ "Of course," she said, tilting her chin slightly upward in an effort to negate the similarity in their height. "Please come in..."

Misao nodded and entered the room. As Megumi pulled out two mats for them to sit on, she thought back to her talk with Sano. \_Megumi-san's so well-mannered and ladylike most of the time... it's hard to picture her acting like Sano said she did. But he always did bring out the worst in her... I remember how rude and bossy she used to be with him in Kyoto. Not that she doesn't have the same effect on him...\_

Misao waved Megumi off as she offered Misao a seat. "I won't be here long," she said. "I just had something I needed to say to

you."

Megumi nodded as she returned to her desk chair. "What is it?" she said, readying herself to gracefully accept Misao's apology.

"Well... I know Sano's supposed to come see you tonight," Misao said, looking away briefly. "I know what happened between you is none of my business... that I should stay out of it... but..." Her voice trailed off as she struggled to find the words to express what she'd found it so easy to say to Sano as they left the shrine --

\_Sano... what happened with Megumi is in the past. You need to forgive her... and yourself. So just tell her you're sorry, even if you think you were right and she was wrong. I'd hate to see you hold on so tightly to the past that it clouds your present... I've seen too much of that with Himura and Aoshi-sama. It's not worth it...\_

Megumi's eyes flashed as she rose from her seat. "Damn that idiot rooster-head... he told you everything, didn't he?" she said sharply. "I knew he was tactless, but this is going too far."

Misao took a step toward Megumi, her temper flaring. "He only told me because I asked him to," she said, her voice rising in response to Megumi's.

"Well, you're right about one thing -- this is none of your business," Megumi snapped. "So I'd appreciate it if you keep your mouth shut and leave right now. I don't have time to soothe your bruised ego on top of everything else..."

"M- my bruised ego?" Misao sputtered. She felt her anger boil over. "What about your ego, you jerk! You can't stand the fact that Sano got over you, so you start flirting with him the minute I walk in the door this morning. It's like what you used to do to Kaoru-san all over again!"

Megumi's face reddened. "You are so wrong, little girl," she hissed. "I couldn't care less what that baka tori does with you or any other tramp that's panting after him!"

"T- t- tramp?" Misao squeaked, reaching for her kunai. "Why, you... you don't know a thing about me! How dare you insult me that way?"

"I could say the same to you," Megumi said, her eyes blazing. "And I'll thank you to keep your weapons hidden. This is a hospital, not a doujou."

Misao felt her own face flush with embarrassment. "Gomen," she grumbled, dropping her hand. "I got carried away, as usual." She pressed her fingers to her temples, grimacing. "Dammit... this isn't at all how I wanted things to go..."

Megumi pressed her lips tightly together, feeling an absurd surge of satisfaction at having regained the upper hand, mingled with shame at her own quick-tempered petty behavior.

Misao's shoulders sagged as she sighed. "Just... accept his apology,"

she said wearily. "That's all I ask. I know you don't care about him... but I do. I'm asking you to forgive him so he can move on with his life." She looked at Megumi pleadingly, though her voice remained even. "I promise I'll leave both you and your assistant in peace if you do this one thing for me."

Megumi stared at Misao, surprised at how openly the ninja girl admitted her feelings for Sano. \_But then, the Misao I knew was never one to hide anything when it came to her feelings. I guess that hasn't changed...\_

"I don't know if I can, Misao-san," she said truthfully. "But I promise you I will try." She swallowed, forcing herself to continue --

"I'm sorry I insulted you... called you a tramp. I was still... annoyed with you from this morning."

Misao smiled inwardly. \_Yappari... I thought I'd gotten to her there.\_ "I apologize for my behavior," she said. "I was just trying to get back at Sano... and you, too, I guess. It won't happen again." \_As long as you keep your hands off Sano, that is...\_

Megumi nodded, hating herself for feeling relieved. \_Ridiculous... why should it matter? It's not like there's anything between Tatsuya-san and me...\_

As if materialized by her thoughts, Tatsuya suddenly appeared in the office doorway. "Megumi-sensei... we need your help," he said breathlessly. "The prisoner.. he's awake and extremely agitated. The guards are holding him down, but he's already managed to rip off half his bandages..."

Megumi pushed by Misao. "Gomen," she said hurriedly as she rushed after Tatsuya. Misao followed the two, thinking that maybe she could help hold the prisoner down. \_It'll be a good opportunity to get a look at him, too... then I can describe him to Sano later...\_

As she entered the room, a policeman grabbed her arm. "Who are you and what business do you have here?" he asked sharply.

Misao broke his grip easily. "It's okay... I'm a friend of Megumi-sensei's," she said. "I wanted to make sure she's protected... I heard this guy is dangerous."

"He's no threat to anyone in his condition," the guard said. "But he's certainly not making it easy for the doctors to treat him. He keeps saying he should've died in the attack... that 'they'll' be back for him, whoever 'they' are."

As the bandit thrashed around on the bed, moaning while Megumi tried to calm him, Misao got a good look at his unbandaged face. She gasped as she stared at him, her face paling.

"Yeah... he's pretty mangled, ne?" the guard said, patting her shoulder. "If you're bothered by it, you should probably wait outside. His other wounds are much worse..."

Misao nodded. "I will... arigatou..." she said in a choked voice before dashing out of the clinic, her mind spinning as the pieces of

information about the Tokyo attacks she'd tried so painstakingly to assemble suddenly snapped into place with alarming clarity.

\_That guy... he was one of Unmei-sensei's senior kempo instructors. Which means... either he's been robbing storekeepers on his own time... or the doujou is actually a front for the yakuza that have been terrorizing the city in the name of the Oniwabanshuu...\_

She lurched to a halt, bending over to catch her breath, her eyes shut tightly against the wave of dread, shame and betrayal that threatened to swamp her. \_I don't want to believe it... that Unmei-sensei could be involved in this. But it all fits. She's always talked about her own band of Oniwabanshuu... her own information network... but she's always stopped short of sharing anything concrete with me. And Takashi Tousei... he's always given me the creeps, though I could never put my finger on why.\_

She opened her eyes, which were hardened with resolve. \_Shikashi... even knowing the thief's identity, all I have to go on are vague hunches and assumptions. I need real proof the doujou is involved... and since no one there knows that I suspect anything, this is a perfect opportunity to get that proof. Before I go to the others, I have to be sure...\_

She began running in the direction of Takashi Doujou, one thought tumbling over and over in her mind --

\_Please... Unmei-sensei... let me be wrong about this...\_

-- End of Chapter 16 --

## 17. These Changing Times

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

**\*\*Note:\*\*** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

**\*\*Chapter 17 -- Breaking Wide Open\*\***

"You were right, Sano," Katsu said as he poured himself a cup of sake. "From what I've been able to gather from my sources, those

thieves are forcing Tokyo's shopkeepers to pay them for what they call 'protection.' Those who refuse are cut down without mercy... like your friend Sekihara-san... as are those who are late with their money."

"The owner of the Kaiko-ya?" Sano asked rhetorically. Katsu nodded, continuing --

"You were right about something else. The few clues I was able to glean from my interviews point straight at that doujou you told me about." He leafed through his notes. "One neighbor says there are often lights burning well into the night there." He held up his hand to stop Sano from interrupting. "I know... that alone proves nothing. However..." He began reading from his notes. "The night the Kaiko-ya's proprietor was murdered, a man who lives next to the doujou says he was awakened by something rustling the trees outside his window. When he looked out, he saw a shadowy figure leap onto the doujou fence and down into the yard. He said the reason he's so sure he wasn't imagining things was because he heard a squishing sound when the figure hit the fence... like the sound wet shoes make when you walk in them."

Sano leaned forward in excitement. "I overheard some of the cops who chased the leader of the bandits that night say he dove into a canal to escape them," he said. "It's all making sense, Katsu. But it's still not enough to go on. I'd need more than some old guy saying he heard wet shoes on a fence one night to prove the Takashi Doujou is where these bastards are based."

"How about this?" Katsu fished something out of his pocket and slid it across the table. Sano stared at the fragment of paper and quirked an eyebrow skeptically.

"What the hell does this have to do with robbery?" he said impatiently.

"I picked this up from the Kaiko-ya," Katsu said with a small smile. "I did a little looking around after the police left. There were several documents in the bookkeeper's desk... all with that name on them... and when I skimmed one of them, I saw it was some kind of payment record." He frowned. "Unfortunately, that's all I saw, since the police chose that moment to return. Needless to say, I was showed the door... but I managed to tear the corner off the document I'd been reading and pocket it without anyone noticing."

Sano examined the writing on the scrap... and paled.

"Shit," he said in a low voice. "Takashi. It's got to be them."

Katsu nodded. "Somehow I don't think they were buying silk from that guy," he said. "From what I saw of that document, it looked like a record of payments made by the Kaiko-ya to the doujou... not the other way around."

Sano hastily stood up, his eyes dark with worry. Katsu grabbed his friend's arm.

"Mate, Sano. You have no idea how many of them you'll be facing," he said. "Better to go to the police with this."

"You don't understand," Sano replied in a rush, shaking his arm free. "Misao is training at that doujou right now. I'm sure the police found those documents you saw... what if they're headed there? All hell'll break loose... and she'll be right in the middle of it. I have to get her out of there!"

He handed the scrap back to Katsu. "Take this to Saitou... tell him everything we discussed," Sano said, clapping Katsu on the shoulder. "And thanks. You did all right, baka-yarou."

Katsu waved Sano away. "Be careful, baka-yarou," he said gruffly. "No woman's worth dying over."

"Don't worry... dying isn't part of my plan," Sano said lightly, flashing Katsu a grin as he headed for the door.

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"Unmei-sensei!" Misao called as she crossed the doujou's quiet courtyard. Puzzled, she checked the sun's position. \_I'm a little early... but not by much. Where is everybody?\_

The silence and lack of students only added to her growing sense of disquiet. \_Something is very wrong... I can feel it.\_ Her expression grew determined. \_Demo... if everybody's out, this may be a good chance for me to do some looking around...\_

She slipped open the door to the doujou's training hall. "Unmei-sensei? Toushi-sempai?" she called, not expecting an answer. Her voice echoed eerily in the empty room. Another shiver ran up her spine. \_I must be careful... Unmei-sensei has trained her students as ninja... which means they're just as good at being sneaky as I am...\_

She scrutinized the walls of the training hall, taking in the list of instructors and students... the weapons stacked neatly against one wall... the hanging scrolls listing various tenets of the Takashi school...

A small sliding door in the far corner.

Misao's eyes narrowed. \_I've never seen anyone use that door...\_

Glancing around to make sure she wasn't being observed, Misao swiftly headed for the door and silently slid it open.

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Aoshi rose from where Umari's tattered body lay sprawled on the floor of his cell. "Kaiten Kenbu Rokuren," he said to Saitou, who stood cross-armed and glowering in the doorway.

"So we know what technique killed him," Saitou growled impatiently. "What I want to know is how the hell his murderer managed to get into his cell, kill him, and leave... all without making a sound or being seen... in broad daylight, and with more than the usual number of

officers on duty." He fingered his jacket pocket absently, then turned away, muttering a curse.

"There's nothing more for us to do here," he said shortly. "We should get to the clinic before this seemingly invisible swordsman gets there first." Aoshi glanced once more at the lifeless, bloodied form on the floor and followed Saitou down the hall.

As Saitou and Aoshi walked out of the building and into the street, a man with long dark hair and wary eyes stepped away from the wall where he'd been leaning.

"I thought you guys would never finish in there," he said.

"Who the hell are you?" Saitou barked.

Katsu smirked slightly. "You don't remember me, Saitou Hajime? I'm hurt," he said.

Saitou pushed past Katsu. "I don't have time for games, ahou," he said.

"Don't you want to know where those thieves you're looking for are holed up?"

Saitou stopped in his tracks. "I remember you now... you're that moron Sagara's friend," he said irritably. "Well, say it. I don't have all day."

Katsu flicked the document scrap at Saitou. The inspector caught it as it fluttered through the air and examined it with narrow eyes. "Where did you get this?" he asked finally.

"My sources," Katsu said, his smirk widening. "The Takashi doujou apparently did quite a bit of business with the Kaiko-ya... or haven't your men made that connection yet?"

\_Takashi...\_ Aoshi mused. \_A common enough name... but it seems so familiar to me...\_

Just as Katsu finished his last sentence, an officer raced up to Saitou with a packet of papers. "Fujita-san! We have a break in the Kaiko-ya murder! We need your permission to search --"

"-- the Takashi doujou... I know," Saitou replied with his usual superior air. "We'll need at least fifty men. Assemble them and have them meet me in front of Oguni Clinic in fifteen minutes."

"Hai, Fujita-san!" the officer said, saluting hastily before dashing into the police headquarters.

Saitou turned to Aoshi. "You're free to come if you'd like," he said with a feral smile. "You might get a shot at their leader... after I'm through with him, of course."

"I'll meet you at the clinic," Aoshi said. Saitou nodded and walked away, fingering the hilt of his katana.

Katsu chuckled briefly, shaking his head. "Sano was right... he is a bastard," Katsu said, glancing at Aoshi. "You're the Oniwabanshuu's

okashira, right?"

Aoshi nodded. "How do you know of us?" he countered.

"I publish a newspaper... I make it my business to know things," Katsu said casually. "Like the fact that one of your onmitsu is training at Takashi doujou this very afternoon..."

Aoshi's eyes widened. \_Wait a minute... I \_\_do\_\_ know that name...\_ "Did you say... Takashi?" he said, his face paling.

"Yes, why?" Katsu replied.

"Take me there," the onmitsu ordered.

Katsu nodded and motioned for Aoshi to follow him. \_Gomen, Sano... I know you hate Shinomori Aoshi's guts... but I'll feel better knowing someone's helping you fight those bastards...\_

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Misao closed the door behind her and examined her surroundings. She appeared to be in a small, dimly lit meditation room... its floors bare except for two mats set in front of a low table. The table was set up as an altar for the dead, with an incense burner... a bowl of rice... and a sheathed sword on a black wooden stand. Misao slowly approached the table, her eyes riveted on the sword, which was shorter than a standard katana.

\_A kodachi?\_

She stood over the table, not wanting to disturb anything... and felt the cold shock of recognition hit her once more as she studied the sword. Her stomach churning, she slowly drew her own kodachi, holding it next to the sheathed blade on the stand.

The hilts were a perfect match.

Misao backed away a step, her blade's sheath falling out of her trembling fingers as Jiya's words came back to her --

\_// ... It used to have a twin... I'm not exactly sure what happened to it... Many times I had the privilege of watching Akihito-sama wield both in battle... //\_

Her mind reeling, she wondered aloud --

"Who the hell are these people?"

A savage voice replied --

"We are your death, Oniwabanshuu bitch."

Misao spun around to face a furious Tousei, who was standing by the now-open door, his swords drawn. He was wearing a variation on the Oniwabanshuu uniform, only in black, with red trim... and spattered with fresh blood.

Misao barely got her sword up in time to meet Tousei's attack. She



managed to parry one blade... and Tousei twisted the other aside, punching her in the face. The force of the blow knocked Misao backwards, but she managed to stay on her feet.

"Pathetic," he sneered. "You aren't fit to wield that sword, little girl." He raised both swords as Misao watched him through narrowed eyes, clutching the kodachi close to her body. She tasted blood, but struggled against spitting it out, not wanting to show weakness to her opponent.

"Come," he said, his eyes glittering. "I'll make this quick."

Misao's temper flared at being so easily dismissed. \_He's right to taunt me, though... I'm definitely overmatched. But I won't just give up. I'm smaller than he is... maybe I can use that to my advantage...\_ She spat out a mouthful of blood and took an offensive stance.

"Here I come," she said, charging. Rather than meeting Tousei head-on, she tried to duck underneath his flashing blades, aiming for his legs. But Tousei anticipated her move, twisting his body around to avoid her attack and ending up behind her.

"Haaah!" he yelled, aiming his next swordstroke at Misao's exposed back. Misao attempted to spin away... and tripped over her discarded sheath. Her clumsiness saved her from taking a hit -- Tousei's blades met empty air as she fell forward. Reflexively, she opened her hands to catch her fall, dropping her sword. It skittered to the side as she landed flat on her face.

"Chikusho!" Misao swore. \_I'm humiliating myself!\_

Tousei snorted, indicating he'd had a similar thought. Ignoring the pain and her bloodied nose, Misao grabbed for her weapon... but Tousei kicked it away.

"Playtime's over, Misao-chan," he said, sheathing his swords. He grabbed Misao's braid, yanking her back and up toward him. She cried out in pain as he twisted her head around and grabbed onto his hands, trying to break his grip. She felt her nails scrape against his wrist and dug them into his flesh as hard as she could. Tousei let out a surprised squawk and released her braid. Misao then sprang up toward him with a snarl, using the top of her head to butt him in the chin. Misao couldn't help smiling grimly as Tousei staggered backward, grimacing... though her own head was throbbing with the force of her blow.

"Don't underestimate me," she panted, throwing a Kecho Geri at his right shoulder. Her foot never met its target -- Tousei deflected her blow with almost casual ease, catching her foot and shoving Misao away. She landed hard on her backside. Before she had even caught her breath, Tousei was upon her, grabbing her by her shirt and pulling her off the floor.

"Bitch," he spat, slapping her so hard across the face that she saw stars, then delivering a crushing blow to her ribcage with an upthrust knee. "Ignorant brat," he taunted, pushing her against the wall as she gasped for air. "You never stood a chance against me."

Misao's eyes were tearing as she fought to regain her breath, her struggle made more difficult by Tousei's hands pressing against her throat. \_Gods... can't breathe... hurts... but I won't... I won't let him win!\_

As she tried to wedge one hand between Tousei's and force them away from her throat, she slid the other inside her sash, pulling out the three kunai she kept hidden there. With the last of her fading strength, she drove them into Tousei's abdomen. He howled, dropping her... and staggered away, clutching his stomach. Two of the kunai clattered to the floor, having only nicked him... but Misao had managed to push one deep into his lower abdomen, just below his ribcage. He dropped to one knee, his face tight with pain.

Misao drew in ragged gasps of air, her vision blurring as each breath sent stabs of agony through her abdomen. Dimly, she realized Tousei was steeling himself to pull out her kunai, and that she would only have a few seconds to attempt to escape. She struggled to her feet, head spinning and legs trembling. Gritting her teeth, she stumbled toward the door as Tousei wrenched the knife out with another anguished howl.

\_C'mon legs... work... just a little further...\_ Misao yelled as Tousei tackled her just outside the open doorway, their momentum propelling them onto the floor of the training hall. He flipped her over, pinning her hands above her head, his flushed face contorted with rage.

"I'll kill you for that," he hissed, pressing his knee into her gut. "Slowly... and painfully... the way I almost killed your friend Sekihara..."

Misao coughed up blood... and spat it in Tousei's face. \_I've no strength left... but if I can get him angry enough, maybe he'll get careless... leave me an opening,\_ she thought, knowing deep down that it was hopeless.

Tousei bared his teeth in a mirthless grin. "Keep it up, bitch," he said, grinding his knee into her ribcage. Misao cried out in agony, her legs flailing helplessly. She felt something in her chest gave way with an almost audible crack and a wave of sickening pain washed over her, blackening her vision. \_Just like that time with Kamatari...\_

Tousei emitted a low, cruel chuckle, his eyes glimmering. "Beg me for your life... and maybe I'll spare it," he said, holding her wrists in one hand and drawing his sword with the other.

Tears streaming down her face, Misao gave the only answer she felt she could --

"Go... to... hell," she gasped.

Tousei's evil grin widened. "You first," he said, raising his sword.

Misao closed her eyes and braced herself for the death-blow. Images of her family and friends floated through her mind...

\_Gomen, Aoshi-sama... Jiya... minna... I failed you all...\_

A single sob escaped her as Sano's smiling face rose before her... his brown eyes warm... his red silk headband fluttering in the breeze...

\_Sano... I'm so sorry... I'll never get to tell you...\_

A sharp command rang through the training hall --

"Enough, Toushi! Release her immediately!"

Toushi exhaled sharply, cursing... but sheathed his sword. Misao felt herself sinking into blessed darkness, finally overcome by the beating she'd taken. Before she lost consciousness, she heard Toshi argue --

"But obaa-san... I thought we agreed. She abandoned her blood and allied herself with our family's destroyer! Such betrayal deserves death!"

Misao passed out before she heard Unmei's cold, resolute reply --

"A traitor she may be, but she is still my granddaughter. And I will give her a chance to redeem herself."

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Sano skidded to a stop in front of the Takashi doujou gate. \_Che... locked,\_ he thought, eyeing the lock. \_I could shatter that with my Futae no Kiwami... but I'd better save it. No telling what I'll be facing in there...\_

He scanned the fence for a good place to climb... and froze as an infuriatingly familiar calm voice intoned --

"You'd be better off waiting for the police, Sagara. They're on their way now."

Sano whirled to face Aoshi. "Fuck the police," he snapped. "Misao's in there, and I'm getting her out before things get ugly. So, either help me over this fence or get the hell out of my face."

Aoshi stepped between Sano and the fence. "Misao's safe as long as she doesn't know what's going on," Aoshi said, lowering his voice to a near-whisper.

"She won't be safe once the police show up!" Sano retorted in a furious whisper. "Those thieving scum'll take her hostage... or worse. For all we know, they have already." He clenched his fists. "Get out of my way, Shinomori... or I swear..."

Aoshi's eyes narrowed slightly. "That's your problem," he said, a hint of exasperation seeping into his even tone. "You go barging through life with no forethought... trusting your fists to make everything right."

"You know, I don't give a damn what you think of me," Sano said, not bothering to lower his voice. "You may be Misao's okashira... but you're not mine. So you can take your orders and opinions and shove

'em." He took a menacing step toward Aoshi. "Now are you gonna help me, or am I gonna have to rearrange your face?"

Aoshi stared silently at Sano for a few seconds, then linked his hands together and bent down on one knee.

"I'll catch up," he said.

Sano grinned triumphantly. He took a running leap toward Aoshi, planting one foot firmly into Aoshi's linked hands. The onmitsu lifted his arms high, sending Sano soaring through the air. Sano landed easily on top of the fence, balancing carefully as he lowered his jacket for Aoshi to grab onto. Sano was reminded of the time he and Katsu had performed a similar move during their abortive attack on the Meiji government.

\_No time for reminiscing now... Misao's in danger. I can feel it...\_

Aoshi nimbly swung himself on top of the fence, scanning the seemingly empty courtyard. \_It may seem empty... but I sense fighting ki nearby. Looks like Sagara might be right... they could already have been tipped off about the police...\_

He caught Sano's eye and motioned toward the doujou's training hall. Sano nodded, and both men dropped to the ground.

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Misao awakened with a muffled groan. \_Ohh... I feel like someone dropped Mt. Hiei on top of me... everything hurts...\_

She tried to move her hands, but discovered they were bound behind her. Her feet were bound as well, she realized, as she wriggled her legs experimentally. Even that slight movement set her entire body keening in pain. She groaned again, becoming aware that a wad of cloth was tightly bound between her lips. She opened her eyes, wincing at the late afternoon sunlight flooding the training hall.

\_So... Toshi didn't kill me after all. That's right... Unmei-sensei stopped him.\_

As her vision cleared, she could see her wizened old instructor sitting cross-legged across from her... watching her with those black, birdlike eyes. She held her breath and managed to roll herself up to a kneeling position, despite the merciless throbbing in her head and the burning in her chest. When her vision cleared again, she met Unmei's gaze directly. The old woman smiled sardonically.

"I'll remove the gag, Misao-chan," she said matter-of-factly. "But if you scream or shout for help, I'll have Toshi cut your tongue out. Do we have a deal?"

Misao glanced over at Toshi, who lounged against the far wall, giving her a poisonous glare. She felt both frightened and furious. \_So I'm to be a hostage? Well... if I go along with them, I might find out more about their organization... and how the hell they ended up with the twin to ojii-san's sword...\_

Misao nodded, earning a more benevolent smile from Unmei.

"Good girl," she said, removing Misao's gag, then returning to her seat. Misao feebly licked her dry lips, wishing for a cup of water. Unmei's eyes narrowed and she motioned to Tousei.

"Get her a cup of water, Tousei," she said imperiously. Tousei opened his mouth to argue, closed it, and stomped over to a bucket in the corner. He dipped a teacup into the bucket and brought it to Unmei. The old woman jerked her head toward Misao. With a sharp sigh, Tousei knelt next to Misao, tipping the cup to her lips. Misao trembled as she drank, expecting Tousei to strike her at any moment. She could feel the waves of rage emanating from him... rage that was only partially directed at her, she realized with a start. \_There's someone else... someone he's hated for a long time. Who could it be?\_

After she emptied the cup, Tousei set it down and returned to his position against the far wall. Unmei then reached behind her and pulled out what appeared to be Misao's kodachi, laying it carefully in front of her.

"So this is where it ended up," she said. "I should have guessed... though I couldn't be sure. I thought that Akihito might have given it to that bastard Shinomori Aoshi instead."

Misao studied Unmei silently. She tried to use the calming deep-breathing technique Aoshi had shown her last winter, but every inhale sent fresh stabs of agony through her abdomen, forcing her to return to short, shallow breaths. \_Shit... definitely a broken rib... more than one, from the feel of it. Even if I manage to slip free of these ropes, I'm in no shape for a fight...\_

"I apologize for Tousei's... rough... treatment of you," Unmei said, her sharp eyes softening slightly. "I wish there had been another way... but what's done is done." She pulled out the twin to Misao's kodachi and set it on the floor alongside the first sword.

"Surely you must be wondering who we are, Misao... and why we have this sword. I'll be happy to tell you, if you'd like. It's a fascinating story."

Misao glared at her instructor without replying. Unmei laughed delightedly.

"My! Such an evil look," she cackled. "You have the infamous Makimachi temper all right. Akihito would be pleased, I think."

"What do you know about my grandfather?" Misao finally burst out. "And why do you have his sword? Did you steal it?"

Unmei's smile turned wicked. "I suppose you could say that," she said. "Though I did keep it in the family. And as for how I know your grandfather... I was married to him. I fought beside him in the earliest days of the Oniwabanshuu. I birthed and raised his sons and kept his house and trained his onmitsu."

Misao could hardly hear Unmei's words through the roaring in her

ears. "You... you're..." she said weakly. "No... it's impossible..."

"It's true, Misao," Unmei said quietly. "I am Takashi Unmei... wife of Makimachi Akihito..."

"Your grandmother..."

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Aoshi and Sano crossed the empty courtyard... and suddenly found themselves surrounded by about a dozen masked men in black uniforms with red trim. "I'm sorry, but we're closed today," one of them said. "We'll have to ask you to leave."

"Heh. They dress like you, Shinomori," Sano said, cracking his knuckles in anticipation. "If they fight as half as good as you do, this'll be fun."

\_Ahou,\_ Aoshi thought, his eyebrow twitching. He drew his kodachi, eyeing the ninja who had addressed them.

"I'm afraid we can't do that," Aoshi said politely.

"Then you'll die," the ninja said flatly, drawing his own katana.

"We'll see about that," Sano said gleefully as he charged toward the three men nearest him.

Five minutes later, only two of the twelve were left standing. Sano head-butted one of the two, who slumped to the ground. He glanced at Aoshi, who was locked in fierce combat with the ninja who had initially spoken with them.

"Oi, Shinomori, need any --" Sano began, then froze as he heard a familiar yell coming from the direction of the training hall.

"Misao!" Sano sprinted toward the building. Cursing under his breath, Aoshi took a deep breath and launched his succession technique --

"Kaiten Kenbu Rokuren!"

It was over in the time it took Aoshi to exhale, his blades tracing lightning-quick patterns over and through his victim. The soldier collapsed, blood spurting from dozens of wounds. "No... Toushi-sama... must... protect," he gurgled before his eyes glazed over. Feeling a small stab of regret, Aoshi flicked the blood from his swords and ran after Sano.

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"Uso!" Misao shrieked. "My grandmother is dead! She's been dead for years!"

"Who told you that... Okina?" Unmei said, her voice rising. "Then he's the liar! That old fool... he would do anything for Akihito-sama... and to protect his precious Aoshi... even lie to an

innocent little girl."

Misao shook her head, feeling as if she might throw up. "Jiya has never lied to me," she said, her strident voice belieing the questions and doubts whirling through her head. "I know him. I believe in him, not you... a total stranger who pretended to be my friend... but is nothing more than a kidnapper and a thief!"

"How dare you, you little bitch!" Toushi shouted. He started toward Misao, but Unmei held up her hand.

"No, Toushi. She has a right to question me," the old woman said with a frown. She addressed Misao again. "Do you know who Toushi is, Misao? He's your cousin. Surely you must remember him a little... he often played with you when you were both very young."

Misao stared at the young man whose expression held such anger and hate it made her tremble. "I don't remember that," she said, but as the words left her mouth, she could hear her own voice rising from the dim recesses of her earliest childhood memories.

\_// ... Tou-nii! Tou-nii! Wait for Misao-chan ... //\_

\_// ... Tou-nii! Misao-chan picked these for you... pretty, ne?  
//\_

\_// ... Tou-nii... we should be in bed... Hanny-kun'll be mad ...  
//\_

She gasped, remembering the gruffly friendly dark-haired boy who faintly resembled the seething onmitsu standing nearby. "Tou-nii?" she asked incredulously. "You're Tou-nii? I remember now..."

"So do I," an icy voice interjected.

Misao twisted her head toward the familiar voice, her whole face alight with joy at the sight of the two men framed in the now-open doorway.

"Sano! Aoshi-sama!" she cried, straining toward them.

"Misao!" Sano shouted, clenching his fists as he took in the ropes that bound her and the bruises and dried blood that marred her lovely face. He had never felt such elemental fury. \_That black-haired bastard \_\_hurt\_\_ her... how \_\_dare\_\_ he touch her... I'll tear him apart!\_

In the blink of an eye, Toushi was standing next to Misao, pressing the flat of his unsheathed sword against her neck. "One more step, Zanza, and I'll cut her throat open," he said flatly.

"Teme," Sano snarled, enraged. "You fucking coward! Hiding behind a hostage!"

"Sagara!" Aoshi's voice was whip-sharp. "Control yourself."

"Fuck you, Shinomori!" Sano shouted, turning to the calm-faced onmitsu standing beside him. "Look at Misao... at what they've done to her! Don't you even care?"

Misao felt her heart swell with feeling for the frustrated street fighter. "Sano," she entreated. "Please... I'm all right... don't worry about me."

Sano stopped his tirade and stared at Misao, who was looking at him with a mixture of fear and concern. But there was something else in her eyes... a tenderness that warmed him from the inside out. \_No one's ever looked at me like that before...\_

Aoshi interrupted Sano's brief reverie. "Let Misao go," he said firmly to Unmei. "It's me you want."

"Huh?" Both Sano and Misao gaped at Aoshi, whose face remained unreadable.

Unmei regarded Aoshi silently for a full minute. Then she threw back her head and laughed... a long, evil laugh that sent chills up Misao's spine.

"Yes," she hissed, fixing her hard, spiderlike eyes on Aoshi. "It's you I want, Shinomori Aoshi. For 13 years I've waited for this moment to take my revenge... to make you pay for the pain and humiliation you caused my son and my family. But I'm afraid I can't release her. She's my assurance that you'll stay to meet your fate."

Aoshi's eyes narrowed to slits of blue fire. "You would use your own granddaughter as a pawn?" he said, his tone dripping with contempt. "I would expect no less from a woman who has betrayed everything her husband stood for."

"Shut up!" Toushi shouted. "You're the traitor here, you son of a bitch! You destroyed my father... disgraced my grandmother... ruined my family and stole the Makimachi birthright!"

Aoshi regarded him coolly. "You must be Makimachi Taki's son Toushi," he said evenly. "You look... and sound... like your father." He glanced at Unmei. "So, Takashi Unmei, what lies have you been feeding your grandson these past 13 years? The same lies you tried to feed the Oniwabanshuu about what an honorable warrior Makimachi Taki was?"

Misao felt her stomach quiver at Aoshi's scathing tone. \_Taki... I think I remember him, too. He was my father's brother... and Tou-nii's father. But he disappeared when I was very young, taking Tou-nii with him. No one ever really told me what happened... and I was so little that I eventually forgot about both of them...\_

"Silence!" Unmei growled through gritted teeth, her eyes flashing. "I've told Toushi nothing but the truth... which is why his is the hand that will deliver my vengeance. It's his lifelong wish to repay you for the misery you left him in after you robbed his father of his birthright."

"You keep using those words... 'robbed'... 'birthright,'" Aoshi said calmly. "You've obviously forgotten it was your own husband who chose to deprive Taki of his 'rightful' place. He's the one who chose Okina to lead the Oniwabanshuu when he was on his deathbed."

"Bah! Anyone with eyes could see you were the one who put him up to



that," Unmei scoffed. "You hardly left his side in the weeks before his death... and Akihito's mind was failing then. He would have easily been persuaded by you."

"If that's so, why didn't I tell him to choose me from the first?" Aoshi said. Misao could swear she heard a touch of bitter amusement in his voice.

"Because the rest of the Oniwabanshuu knew Akihito was fading... they would've questioned his sanity if he named a 15-year-old stripling as okashira," Unmei retorted. "Coming from Okina, no one would question it. Your plot worked beautifully, Shinomori... and it cost my son his honor and, eventually, his life."

Toushi dropped the sword he was holding on Misao and grabbed the twin kodachi from the floor, unsheathing them in the process. He then stepped forward, assuming a fighting stance. "I'll make you pay for every day of misery you caused my family," he said. "I will make you beg for mercy... the way you made my father beg 13 years ago. And like you, Shinomori Aoshi... I'll show none."

Misao's eyes widened. \_Beg... for mercy? And Aoshi-sama refused him? That's not right... the Aoshi-sama I knew then would've never refused someone mercy... especially the son of the Oniwabanshuu's founder... no matter what the circumstances.\_

"Oi, Shinomori," Sano said in an undertone. "What the hell are they blabbing about? Don't tell me you killed that guy's father?"

"No," Aoshi said, turning his gaze to Misao. The sight of her pale, battered face... the sound of her shallow, ragged breathing... made him yearn to draw his swords and slice Toushi in half.

\_No... I mustn't lose my composure. It's the only advantage I have right now. Takashi Toushi's obviously the one who used the Kodachi Nitou Ryuu succession technique on one of his own men... which means we're likely evenly matched in terms of sword skill. But his lack of emotional mastery could prove his undoing...\_

Misao locked eyes with Aoshi... and was shocked to see something akin to fury lurking in their blue-gray depths. \_He's angrier than I've ever seen him... though he hides it well, as always. Is it because of me? Or because of the accusations from Unmei-sensei and Toushi\_

"Misao," Aoshi said, his gentle voice a sharp contrast to the cold tone he'd been using. "Gomen nasai. It seems I've been the cause of more pain for you."

"Iya," Misao said, her throat thickening. "It was my fault, Aoshi-sama. I should have come to you first." She swallowed, and continued in a rush --

"Aoshi-sama... what's going on here? What does Unmei-sensei mean, saying you destroyed her son?"

Unmei sneered at him. "Tell her, Shinomori," she said. "Tell your little disciple how you really earned your title." She turned to Misao. "Your beloved Aoshi-sama may have told you he was appointed okashira without incident... but it's not true. I challenged Okina's

decision... as did my son, Taki."

Misao watched as Aoshi's face darkened. She felt as if someone had punched her in the gut again. \_She's telling the truth? All these years... Aoshi-sama and Okina kept this from me? Deceived me?\_

"What she says is true," Aoshi said, his eyes never leaving Misao's. "As Akihito's only living son, Taki insisted it was his right to lead the Oniwabanshuu. He was a relatively skilled swordsman... probably as good as your father was. But he was... wild. Undisciplined. Self-centered. Because of these things, your grandfather felt he wouldn't make a good leader."

Unmei snorted. "Akihito always favored your father," she said to Misao. Her fierce gaze softened briefly. "Understandably so, since Sorata was the eldest... and a fine warrior." Her mouth hardened again. "But that favoritism blinded him to Taki's true nature."

Misao felt as if her body had turned to water and her mind to fog. She stared numbly at Aoshi as he started to reply... then stopped as they heard a furious pounding outside --

"Open up, Takashi Toushi!" someone shouted. "This is the police! You have two minutes to open this gate... or we're coming in after you. Which will it be?"

"Dammit!" Toushi roared, turning to Misao. "Well, they're not getting me without a fight." He pulled Misao roughly to her feet. "Obaa-san, cut her feet loose... I'll use her to get us past the police."

"You will do no such thing, Toushi," Unmei said calmly.

Toushi stared at his grandmother incredulously. "But obaa-san..." he protested.

Unmei gazed at him, her face warm with affection. "Go, my grandson," she whispered. "You can sneak past those inept fools. Let me handle the police. Better you survive to take our revenge at another time."

"Obaa-san!" Toushi whispered, gripping the old woman's shoulders.

"Maa, maa... no fussing now," she said briskly. "Go... remember... I'm counting on you!"

Toushi sped toward the door to the meditation room and disappeared before anyone could react. Aoshi glanced at Misao, his eyes flickering with uncertainty.

Unmei cackled. "You'd better hurry, \_okashira,\_ " she said derisively. "My Toushi is a speedy one... you'll lose him if you don't leave now."

Aoshi's mouth tightened. "Take care of Misao, Sagara," he said quietly.

"Aa," the fighter replied soberly.

"No! Aoshi-sama..." Misao cried, tears springing to her eyes. "You don't know what he's like! His hatred of you... it gives him such strength..." \_I'm so afraid he'll...\_

Aoshi turned to her, a slight smile on his face. Misao's heart skipped a beat as he approached her.

"I sought strength from hatred once... and Himura defeated me," he said, his eyes locked on hers. "This time, I will draw my strength from the same source as he." \_I will protect her, Sorata-san... this time, I will \*not\* fail...\_

"Aoshi-sama..." she said softly, a lone tear sliding down her cheek. Aoshi brushed it away with his fingertips.

"Misao... I'm sorry about that night in Kyoto," he whispered. "I wanted you to know that... just in case I don't return..."

"No!" She shook her head emphatically, ignoring the pain it caused her. \_What does he mean? Why is he telling me this now? What does he want from me?\_

Distraught and confused, Misao reached for the first response that came to her mind --

"I forgive you, Aoshi-sama," she said, forcing a smile, though her eyes continued to glisten. "Go now... before you lose him. We can talk more when you return."

Aoshi nodded, swiftly crossing the room and disappearing through the far doorway.

-- End of Chapter 17 --

## 18. These Changing Times

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

**\*\*Note:\*\*** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

**\*\*Chapter 18 -- Reckonings, Part 1\*\***

After Aoshi left, Sano approached Misao, keeping one wary eye on Unmei.

"Misao..." he said softly, feeling bereft as he watched her stare at the doorway Aoshi had just disappeared through, tears rolling silently down her cheeks. \_Of course... you still love him. I'd almost forgotten... I almost thought... but it was just a foolish dream...\_

"Misao," he repeated, louder this time as he knelt next to her. "We should get you to the clinic..."

Misao turned to face him, her face crumpling. "Sano," she sobbed, burying her face against his shoulder. "I... ow... I'm so sorry... itai... shouldn't have gone alone... ow... I failed everyone..."

Sano held her gingerly, not wanting to aggravate her injuries. "I know you feel that way, kirei," he murmured soothingly, stroking her hair. "But you did fine."

Misao pushed herself away from Sano. "Don't patronize me, rooster-head... Toushi kicked my ass," she said, looking at the floor, her voice thick with self-disgust.

"Maybe so... but you gave him at least one good shot. I saw his bloody shirt," Sano said, tipping her chin up and examining her face. "He was feeling it, too." He touched her bruised cheek gently, then moved behind her to untie her wrists. "Do you think you can walk?" he asked as the ropes fell to the floor. "I'd hate to have to carry you -- with those broken ribs, it'll hurt for your waist to be bent like that."

"How did you know my ribs were broken?" Misao asked, rubbing her hands together to restore circulation while Sano removed the ropes from her ankles.

"You can barely breathe without wincing," Sano said, touching her torso with one fingertip. Misao bit her lip to keep from crying out from the sharp pain. Sano's eyes narrowed.

"It's worse than I thought," he said. "Maybe I should try to bandage them now." He glanced over at the old woman, who stood watching them silently, her hands clasped in front of her. "Oi, oba-san... where do you keep your bandages?"

Unmei stared at Sano, a small smile on her lips. She wordlessly pointed to a small chest sitting next to the weapons against the wall. With a brisk nod, Sano strode over to it, leaving Misao facing Unmei.

The old woman's smile broadened. "He's a handsome devil," she said. "Temper and bravado to spare... just like your grandfather. He's a good match for you, Misao-chan."

The young woman turned her mournful expression on her elder. "Why, Unmei-sensei... obaa-san?" she asked thickly. "Why didn't you tell me? Or was I just part of the whole plan for you to get to Aoshi-sama?"

Unmei smiled sadly at her granddaughter. "No, Misao-chan... I had no idea you were in Tokyo until the day I saw you training in that field," she said. Her eyes misted as she continued --

"Seeing you in that uniform... your hair in that long braid, the way your mother used to wear it... and those eyes, so like your father's... I knew in an instant you were my granddaughter, even before you gave your name. It brought back such pleasant memories... the times Akihito and I were close... our children happy." She hastily drew a hand across her eyes. "Mattaku... what a time to get emotional," she chuckled. "The curse of being old... you live more and more in your memories."

Her face hardened briefly. "True, I mainly asked you to train with me to keep better track of your okashira," she said, her voice becoming wistful. "But I also wanted to know you better... and as I did, I wanted more and more to reclaim you as my flesh and blood."

She walked up to Misao and stroked the young woman's unbruised cheek. "It's not too late," she said.

Misao jerked away from Unmei's touch. "How can you say that?" she said angrily. "You plotted to kill Aoshi-sama out of some twisted vengeance I don't understand at all! And your grandson almost killed me for the same cause! What makes you think I would ever forgive you for that?"

Sano rushed to Misao's side, his arms filled with bandages. "Leave her alone, oba-san," he barked. "She's suffered enough because of you."

Misao glanced at Sano gratefully... and suddenly burst out laughing.

"Daijoubu, Misao?" he asked, frowning. \_She's finally snapped... and who can blame her...\_

Misao shook her head, pointing at the armload of bandages. "Sano... it's only my ribs," she gasped, wincing. "You have enough bandages to cover all of me... twice... I'm not Shishio, you know."

Sano grinned sheepishly. "Didn't want to run out," he said. "Now stop laughing... you're hurting yourself."

Misao stuck her tongue out playfully at Sano, who muttered a curse. "How can you still be so damned cheerful after all this?" he said in an undertone, glancing sidelong at Unmei, who had retreated to the side wall but still watched them closely.

Misao sobered. "Yahiko asked me the same question after Kaoru-san..." she said, her voice trailing off as she remembered that horrible time. "I told him then that my cheerfulness was my strength. I guess the answer's still the same."

Sano smiled, brushing a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. "I never thanked you for looking out for Yahiko then," he said. "If it weren't for you, he would've given up... like the rest of us did..."

"Shh," Misao hushed him, putting a finger to his lips. "What's past

is past. We have enough problems right now." She flinched again, bringing Sano back to the present.

"Sumanu, Misao... I need you to take your shirt off," he said.

"My breasts are bound anyway," she said, her cheeks flaming. "Don't worry about it."

Sano looked away as she slowly untied her sash, then slipped off her sleeveless top, each small motion setting her teeth on edge from the pain.

"I'm ready now," she said.

"I'll try to be gentle," Sano said, turning to her, linen strips in hand. He inhaled sharply as he saw the ugly bruises beginning to blossom all over her abdomen. \_That fucking bastard... I could kill him with my bare hands,\_ he thought, his face twisting briefly into a snarl. He pushed that thought aside and concentrated on wrapping the bandages snugly around Misao's ribcage and lower abdomen. Misao clenched her jaw to keep from screaming in agony, but she couldn't prevent an occasional whimper from escaping or stop the tears from leaking out of her tightly closed eyes.

"Oh, Misao," Sano whispered as he finished tying the final knot. Heedless of Unmei's continued regard, he kissed Misao tenderly. "I'm sorry, kirei... I wish I could heal them for you..."

Misao managed a small smile. "That helped," she said softly, kissing him in return.

The building suddenly trembled as a massive cracking sound reverberated through the stillness. "Che... the police," Sano said as he handed Misao her shirt. "I forgot all about them."

"You should let them in," Misao said, pulling the garment on and holding it closed. \_No way I can retie that sash... it hurts too damned much...\_

Sano glanced at Unmei, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor with her eyes closed. I don't know if I want to leave you alone with her, he said, keeping his voice down. What if she tries to hold you hostage again?

I don't think she will, Misao said. She seems to be leaving everything up to Toushi now. She blinked several times, fighting tears. I just wish I understood what this was all about, she whispered.

Sano looked away from Misao's grave, worried face, shutting his eyes tightly against the sharp sting of disappointed rejection he felt.

\_If you still love him that much... then there's only one thing for me to do...\_

"I'll bring him back to you."

Misao jumped slightly and stared at Sano, who was now looking at her with grim determination. "What did you say?" she asked, her brow

furrowing in confusion.

"I said I'll find him and bring him back to you," Sano repeated, his voice strengthening. "Like Kenshin did that time. That idiot okashira of yours forgets there are people who care whether he lives or dies... so I'll be there to remind him that you're waiting for him." He leaned down and kissed her forehead, murmuring --

"It's a promise, Misao. So please don't worry anymore... you need to save your strength. Just focus on getting better, okay?"

A glimmer of understanding began to work its way through Misao's bewildered thoughts. \_He thinks... of course... how stupid of me! I've been so worried about Aoshi-sama that I didn't consider Sano's feelings...\_

"Sano --" she began.

The police chose that moment to burst into the doujou.

"You're all under arrest!" shouted a burly man, pointing his sword at the three figures in the training hall.

"Oi, baka-yarou... we're not --"

Before Sano could finish, several officers had jumped him and were trying to wrestle him to the ground. Two others grabbed Misao's arms and yanked her roughly to her feet, pinning her arms behind her and setting a fresh wave of pain surging through her chest and stomach. Her anguished cry enraged Sano, who easily threw off his attackers, roaring --

"Get your fucking hands off her! Can't you see she's hurt? Cops or not, I'll smash your heads in if you don't --"

"Release them."

At Saitou's sharp command, the officers immediately backed away from Sano, who rushed to Misao's side. "I'm all right," she said weakly, her white face and trembling limbs belieing her assertion. Sano wordlessly put his arm around her, and she sank against him with a grateful sigh.

Saitou strode briskly past the pair, his narrowed amber eyes scanning the room. His sharp gaze fell on Takashi Unmei, who remained seated on the floor.

"Where is Takashi Tousei?" Saitou asked her in a cold voice.

The old woman merely smiled slyly in response.

"Gone," Sanosuke said flatly. "But with Shinomori chasing him, he won't get far."

Saitou gestured to the officer who'd tried to arrest the doujou's occupants. "Tell your men to search the surrounding streets and alleys and fan out from there," he said.

"Hai, Fujita-san!" The officer motioned for his men to follow him outside. Saitou turned his attention back to Unmei.

"Takashi Unmei... head instructor of the Takashi doujou... and until today, a well-respected resident of Tokyo," he said, smirking slightly. "You'll be coming with me now."

Unmei continued to smile, eyes glinting. "It won't do you any good, Miburo," she said in a malicious undertone before assuming a feeble, weak countenance. "I'm an old woman... forgetful, you know," she warbled. "I don't know how much help I'll be to you young officers."

Saitou's eyebrow lifted slightly. "Shinichi... escort Takashi to police headquarters," he said. The young officer snapped a salute, took Unmei's right arm and motioned to another officer to take her left. They escorted her out the door as she babbled nonsense about the weather.

Saitou finally glanced at Sano and Misao. "Yare, yare," Saitou said, studying Misao's battered appearance. "Hasn't your okashira taught you the value of knowing your own limitations, weasel girl?"

Sano knew Misao was in bad shape when she didn't even flinch at Saitou's barb. "Misao?" he said anxiously as he watched her eyelids flutter closed and felt her go limp against his side.

"You'd better get her to the clinic," Saitou said gruffly, without a trace of his usual sarcasm. Sano nodded distractedly, scooping the unconscious girl into his arms and hurrying out the door.

Toushi skidded to a stop at the end of an alley, listening as the sounds of shouting and police whistles grew closer. Frantically, he scanned both sides of the street facing the alley for a place to hide. As he searched, he heard the faint, pealing sound of a child's laugh. His eyes narrowed as he glimpsed an open gate off to his right... and two small girls playing just inside the fence.

\_A place to hide... and hostages. Lucky for me...\_

The onmitsu swiftly crossed the street, heading for the open gate.

.....

"Cheater!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Not!"

"Are!"

Suzume giggled as she smoothed her doll's kimono. "Yahiko-nii and Yutarou-nii are so funny when they fight," she chortled as the boys hurled insults at one another.

Ayame frowned as she watched Yutarou throw aside his shinai at Yahiko's goading and pounce on his rival. "They're not being funny now," she said, raising her voice. "Yahiko-nii! Yutarou-nii! Stop it



before you hurt each other!"

"That's the idea," Yahiko growled, biting Yutarou on the shin. The blond-haired boy yelped.

"Who's fighting like a girl now, Myojin?" he snarled, throwing an elbow into Yahiko's gut.

Ayame jumped to her feet, clenching her fists angrily. "If you don't stop fighting this second, I'm getting Ken-nii!" she shouted.

At that moment, a black-haired, black-clad man came running into the yard. His piercing black eyes met Ayame's, and hers widened in horror as she saw the blood on his shirt and the swords sheathed at his side.

She and Suzume screamed.

Toushi moved swiftly to grab the young girls... but his path was blocked by two grim-faced, disheveled boys, each holding a shinai in a defensive posture.

"Who the hell are you?" Yahiko snarled.

"And what right do you have to just barge in here?" Yutarou hissed through gritted teeth.

Toushi snorted derisively. "Well... if it isn't the chibi-swordsman club," he sneered. "Step aside, little boys, before you get hurt."

Yahiko and Yutarou both clenched their hilts, wearing nearly identical outraged expressions.

"Make us," they said fiercely.

.....

Megumi sighed as she slid the door to the thief's room closed. "That medicinal tea should keep him sleeping for awhile," she said to Tatsuya.

The young doctor took the empty cup from Megumi's hand. "You look tired, Megumi-san," he said. "Why don't you go lie down for awhile? I can handle anything else that comes up."

Megumi turned weary eyes on her assistant's concerned face. \_Sweet, considerate Tatsuya-san. If only you were a few years older... or I a few years younger...\_

"I am tired," she said. "Arigatou, Tatsuya-san... I think I will --"

Her voice trailed off as an anxious bellow resounded down the hall.

"Megumi? Genzai-sensei? We need a doctor here!"

"Sanosuke?" Megumi gasped as the fighter rounded the corner carrying an unconscious Misao. "What happened?"

"No time to explain," Sano panted. "She took a real beating, Megumi... and she feels so cold and clammy..."

"Calm down and be quiet for a minute," Megumi snapped. She felt Misao's forehead and cheeks. "She's in shock," the doctor said, touching the bandages bound around her middle. "There's no blood... did she break a rib?"

"I think so... maybe more than one," Sano said. "Her abdomen's all bruised up... and it hurt her to breathe..."

"I'll have to take a look," Megumi said, turning to Tatsuya. "Could you heat some water for me, please, Tatsuya-san? We'll need some fresh bandages as well. Sanosuke, follow me."

The three entered a nearby room, where Sano laid Misao on an examining table. Megumi handed Sano a blanket. "Put this over her... we need to warm her up," the doctor said, picking up a scalpel from a tray and turning back to Misao. "For the bandages," she explained as Sano's face paled. Within seconds, she'd ripped them open and was deftly pressing her fingers over Misao's stomach. The young onmitsu stirred, whimpering, before sinking back into unconsciousness.

"Three broken ribs," Megumi said, a note of exasperation in her voice. "Mou, Misao-chan... what kind of trouble did you get yourself into this time?"

"She tangled with the leader of those bandits," Sano said. "And did some damage of her own, too. So don't give her a hard time, okay, kitsune-onna?" He started for the door.

"Chotto, Sanosuke! Where are you going?" Megumi said sharply.

Sano's eyes met the doctor's, then lingered on Misao's prone form, shining with such intense emotion it took Megumi's breath away.

"To keep a promise," he said simply. "Tell Misao that when she wakes up. It'll make her feel better."

Megumi stared at him, speechless, as he ducked out the door... then turned back to the girl lying on the table, mumbling --

"I don't know whether to consider you lucky or cursed, Misao-chan... because that baka tori is most definitely in love with you..."

.....

Aoshi had little trouble keeping up with Toshi as he slipped swiftly from roof to alleyway to fence-top. \_That wound must be slowing him down... which means his fight with Misao wasn't as one-sided as it first appeared,\_ he thought with satisfaction.

Aoshi stopped and ducked out of sight as Toshi came to a sudden halt at the end of an alley. He peered around the corner of the alley, watching as Toshi scanned the street in front of him. As his quarry slipped into the street, Aoshi stealthily made his way to the end of the alley...

And froze, his eyes widening as he saw Toushi head straight through the open gate to the Kamiya doujou.

\_Oh no... Kamiya Kaoru... the children...\_

Aoshi sprinted toward the opening, rushing inside just as Toushi began unsheathing his swords to attack the two kenjutsu students that stood protectively in front of two terrified young girls. \_Myojin Yahiko... Kamiya Kaoru's best student... and I don't recognize the other...\_

In the time it took Toushi's swords to leave their sheaths, Aoshi drew his own kodachi and leaped over Toushi's head, whirling in midair and landing lightly on his feet in front of Yahiko and Yutarou.

"Sugoi," both boys breathed, their eyes bright with excitement.

"Your fight is with me, not these children," Aoshi said calmly.

Toushi grinned evilly. "You're right, Shinomori," he said, charging at the Oniwabanshuu's okashira, swords flying.

Aoshi parried Toushi's blows, yelling over his shoulder --

"Get those girls out of here!"

"Right!" Yahiko said, nodding to Yutarou. The boys turned to Ayame, who was holding her weeping sister tightly and fighting to control her own shaking. Yahiko took Suzume from Ayame, and Yutarou helped the older girl to her feet.

Aoshi relaxed almost imperceptibly as he watched the children scurry toward the back of the doujou. Toushi frowned and threw a round-house kick at his opponent's head, which Aoshi dodged at the last minute.

"You'd best pay attention to me, Aoshi-sama," Toushi said, drawing the honorific out in a high, mocking voice. "Or I'll beat you to a pulp... like I did your little apprentice."

Aoshi's jaw visibly tightened as he pictured Misao's battered face... the way she'd struggled to breathe... the tears glistening in her eyes. He took a deep breath and released it, hearing the voice of his okashira Akihito-sama rising from his memories --

\_// Breathe in... breathe out... let the anger flow out of you like water, Aoshi. Anger... frustration... fear... these emotions are your worst enemy in battle... they cloud your vision... dull your senses... //\_

His equilibrium restored, Aoshi fixed his eyes on Toushi as the two men moved in a slow circle, each assessing the other, hoping to find the slightest opening... the tiniest hint of weakness. Several long, silent minutes passed before Toushi addressed Aoshi again --

"This is getting boring, Shinomori. I didn't spend the last 13 years

of my life in training to stand here and gawk at you..."

Aoshi braced himself as Toushi charged toward him.

.....

Kenshin stood up from the washtub, his eyes narrowed as he heard the faint clang of swords meeting and a familiar voice shout --

"Get those girls out of here!"

\_Shinomori Aoshi? Fighting... here?\_ Kenshin absently fingered the hip where his sakabatou used to hang. \_Best go get my sword...\_

He started for the doujou, but stopped short as Yahiko, Yutarou and Ayame came racing toward him, Yahiko carrying Suzume, Yutarou supporting Ayame.

"Doushita, Yahiko?" he asked.

"Kenshin... it's Aoshi and some strange guy with bloody clothes," Yahiko panted. "I think he might be one of the guys Misao trains with at the Takashi doujou... but I can't be sure. It was really weird."

"And scary!" Suzume whimpered, burying her tear-streaked face against Yahiko's neck.

Kenshin frowned, his mind working feverishly. \_Misao told me Aoshi has been helping Saitou look into those robberies... so I have to assume his opponent is one of the thieves. I have to protect Kaoru and Kintou above all else... as well as these children...\_

"This is what I want you to do, Yahiko," he said in a low voice. "You and Yutarou-dono take the girls home... then go to Yutarou-dono's house and wait for news from me there."

"Chotto, Kenshin!" Yahiko protested. "I can help you... I know I can..."

"Me too!" Yutarou chimed in.

"You're both very strong," Kenshin agreed. "That's why I need you to protect Ayame-chan and Suzume-chan right now. The man Aoshi is fighting is extremely dangerous... you need to get them to safety right away. Go now."

Yahiko gritted his teeth and gave a brisk nod. "Come on, Yutarou," he said. "Hang on tight, Suzume-chan... we're going to be running. Can you be brave for a little while longer?"

Suzume nodded against Yahiko's neck. "Yahiko-nii and Yutarou-nii will protect us," she said confidently, her wet brown eyes fixed on his trustingly. Yahiko felt a surge of pride swell within him, quashing some of his irritation at being left out of the main fight.

As the four hurried toward the back gate, Ayame said in a voice meant for Yutarou's ears alone --

"You were so brave, Yutarou-nii."

The blond boy blushed. "C'mon," he said, taking her hand. "We'd better move fast or we'll lose Yahiko."

.....

For a time, it looked to Aoshi as if he and Toushi would fight to a stalemate. The Oniwabanshū's okashira gracefully swung his blades in a perfect mirror of Toushi's attacks, able to anticipate each before it occurred just by watching the position of the younger man's blades and the movements of his feet.

\_Onmyou Kousa...\_

Toushi brought both swords around in a deadly arc, using one blade to push the second, increasing its speed. Aoshi simultaneously dodged the first blade and brought his kodachi down hard on the second. Toushi grunted as the force of Aoshi's counter nearly jarred the blade from his grip, but he managed to hold on, jumping away from Aoshi to regain his hold on his sword. He paused only for the space of a breath before launching his next attack.

\_Gokou Juuji...\_

Aoshi swiftly countered with the same simultaneous horizontal and vertical swordstrokes, the attacks cancelling each other out. Toushi gritted his teeth in frustration. \_Isn't there anything obaa-san taught me that this bastard doesn't already know?\_ Growling, he danced backward, then leaped at Aoshi, his swords twisted at an angle Aoshi instantly recognized.

\_Kaiten Kenbu Rokuren...\_

Aoshi flipped over Toushi's head just before his swords descended in the distinctive, blindingly fast slashing pattern that marked Kodachi Nitou Ryū's succession technique. The instant his toes touched the ground, Aoshi whirled around and came at Toushi with all his speed and strength --

\_Onmitsu Oniwabanshū shiki... Kaiten Kenbu Rokuren!\_

Toushi managed to turn in time to deflect one lightning-fast blade, but when his second kodachi met Aoshi's, the power of Aoshi's swing knocked Toushi's sword loose. As it fell to the ground, Aoshi flipped his blade and slashed Toushi's shoulder. The younger man grimaced, but didn't cry out. Aoshi parried Toushi's remaining sword and backed away, flicking the blood from his blade.

"So," Toushi panted, ignoring the blood trailing down his sleeve as he picked up his kodachi. "I see your tendency to attack from behind like a coward hasn't changed."

Aoshi frowned. "Who told you that... your grandmother?" he said sharply. "She's confused... it's your father Taki who specialized in attacking when the fight was done and his opponent's back turned."

"Liar!" Toushi shouted, hurling a kodachi at Aoshi's head. Aoshi mentally snorted in disdain as he knocked it away. \_Onmyou Hasshi...

does he really think I'll be fooled so easily?\_

Aoshi dodged what he expected to be the second kodachi, thrown directly behind the first so as to be hidden from view. But it never came. Instead, Aoshi heard from above --

"Kaiten Kenbu -- Tengeki Kourin!"

\_What the hell?\_

Aoshi had barely raised his swords when Toushi came crashing down upon him like a strike from heaven, his single kodachi a gleaming, deadly blur. The force behind Toushi's first swing knocked one kodachi from Aoshi's hand. With his remaining sword, Aoshi managed to parry the second slash, but Toushi deflected Aoshi's kodachi on the third and struck the older man in the chest. Toushi laughed triumphantly... until a vicious kick in the face from Aoshi sent him flying across the yard.

"Enough," a cold voice commanded as Toushi jumped to his feet, wiping blood from his nose.

Toushi looked up wildly. "Who dares to interrupt --" he began, then fell silent, his eyes widening as he caught sight of the speaker... a short man with red hair... narrowed violet eyes... a sword at his side... and a faint cross-shaped scar on his cheek.

"Kuso," he muttered. \_Of all the places in Tokyo... I \_\_would\_\_ pick the Hitokiri Battousai's doujou to start a fight in...\_

"Himura," Aoshi said gravely, bowing. "I apologize for the intrusion."

Kenshin stared at Aoshi, then at Toushi. "Who is this man, Aoshi?" he asked.

"Takashi Toushi," Aoshi replied. "Leader of the thieves that have been attacking Tokyo's citizens in the name of the Oniwabanshuu."

"Oi!" Toushi snapped. "You have no proof of that!"

"He attacked Misao... then held her hostage," Aoshi continued, ignoring Toushi's protests. "I am here to bring him to justice."

Kenshin flicked the hilt of his sakabatou up with his thumb, unsheathing the blade by an inch. "Allow me to assist you," he said, his eyes flashing.

"I appreciate the offer... but this isn't your fight," Aoshi said firmly, seemingly unaware of his own chest wound, which was dripping blood.

"You made it my fight when you both invaded my home," Kenshin retorted, a thin thread of amber piercing the violet of his eyes. "But I will respect your wishes and leave this to you, Aoshi." He pushed his sakabatou back in its sheath and rested a hand lightly on the hilt, adding in a low, ominous voice --

"For now."

Toushi shivered in spite of himself. \_They say he killed hundreds during the Bakumatsu... but I've also heard rumors that he can no longer wield a sword effectively,\_ he thought in an attempt to reassure himself. \_That should make defeating him easy... but first...\_

"Shall we continue, Shinomori?" he said with a mocking smile. "I have several other surprises for you..."

-- End of Chapter 18--

## 19. These Changing Times

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^\_^;;

**\*\*Note:\*\*** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

**\*\*Chapter 19 -- Reckonings, Part 2 \*\***

Megumi gently wiped the last of the crusted blood off Misao's face with the damp rag Tatsuya had handed her. "There, Misao-chan... now you look more like yourself, except for those bruises," she said, dropping the soiled cloth back in the basin. The doctor wiped her hands on her smock as she continued gently scolding the unconscious girl. "Really, what were you thinking, fighting that cruel, evil man by yourself? You should have at least brought that baka tori with you... what he lacks in brains, he makes up for in muscle."

Tatsuya couldn't help smiling briefly at Megumi's one-sided dialogue as he tucked the heavy blanket around their patient. "Her temperature seems normal again, Megumi-sensei," he said. "Which means her internal organs are likely undamaged, ne?"

"Probably," Megumi said, frowning as she felt Misao's forehead. "Still, I want to keep an eye on her. If there is anything else wrong with her, it will show up in the next day or so."

"I'll be happy to --" Tatsuya began, but he was interrupted by a low moan from Misao. She shifted, her eyelids flickering open.

"Me... gu... mi... sensei?" she murmured groggily. "Sano?"

Megumi and Tatsuya exchanged worried glances. The doctor rested her hand lightly on Misao's head, saying --

"Misao-chan, please go back to sleep. You need your rest after everything you've been through."

Misao tried to rise, but Tatsuya gently restrained her.

"Listen to Megumi-sensei, Makimachi-san... you're not well..."

A few tears slipped from Misao's eyes as she glanced around the room. "Where's Sano?" she said, her voice trembling with anxiety. "I need to see him... tell him..."

Megumi gritted her teeth. \_Damn you, Sanosuke, for leaving her right now! But at least I can give her your message...\_

"Misao-chan," Megumi said, brushing the girl's damp bangs out of her eyes. "Sanosuke isn't here right now. He told me to tell you he's keeping his promise to you."

Misao's reaction was the exact opposite of what Megumi had hoped for. She sat bolt upright, her face contorting in pain, and cried --

"No, no, no! That's not what I wanted at all! He's such an idiot! I have to find him..."

She lurched out of bed... and promptly collapsed on the floor, trembling violently. Megumi muttered something about stubborn, quick-tempered weasels as she and Tatsuya lifted Misao off the floor and put her back into bed.

"You don't understand," Misao sobbed as Megumi tucked the blanket tightly around her again. "Toushi is a killer... he doesn't care... it was bad enough when Aoshi-sama... now Sano, too... it's not fair..."

Misao clenched her eyes and jaw tightly, trying to compose herself. She turned her head away from Megumi's grave, sympathetic face, feeling her tears slip onto the pillow.

\_Fine... keep your promise. Bring Aoshi-sama back to me, Sano... that way I know you'll come back, too...\_

.....

Sano hurdled the doujou's back gate, skidding to a halt by the laundry-tub. His eyes narrowed as he saw a wet, soapy diaper hanging over its edge. \_Where the hell did Kenshin go? Is something wrong with Jou-chan?\_

He heard the sound of voices coming from around the front of the doujou. \_Doesn't sound like the kids... it almost sounds like...\_

As he rounded the corner of the building, his suspicions were confirmed. Aoshi and Toushi stood facing each other, swords drawn....



and Kenshin stood on the porch, watching them with one hand on the hilt of his sakabatou and a grim look on his face.

Sano approached him warily, waiting until he'd caught Kenshin's eye before hopping up onto the porch. "Well, that was easy," Sano said, pitching his voice so only Kenshin could hear him. "I was gonna ask you to help me track these guys... didn't think they'd end up here."

Kenshin didn't reply. Sano swallowed and continued gamely --

"Been a long time since I've seen you this pissed. That bastard didn't threaten Jou-chan or Kintou, did he?"

"If he had," Kenshin said, keeping his eyes on the swordsmen, "he wouldn't be standing right now."

\_I forgot how scary he can be,\_ Sano thought, shuddering inwardly. "Right," he said, turning to watch the combatants.

Toushi gritted his teeth against the pain in his abdomen, which was burning and throbbing more intensely with every movement. He could feel fresh blood seeping into the bandages his grandmother had applied to the wound. \_Che... must have reopened the wound during the Tengeki Kourin. Makimachi Misao... you traitorous bitch... after I've destroyed your okashira, you're next... \_

Aoshi glanced down at Toushi's stomach. The onmitsu followed Aoshi's gaze, grimacing as he saw a darker stain spreading across the black fabric of his shirt.

"If you surrender now, I'll take you to the clinic to have your wounds treated before you're imprisoned," Aoshi said without changing his defensive stance. "You won't get the same courtesy from the police."

Toushi let loose a short, sarcastic laugh. "What a kind offer," he sneered. "But you should be worrying about yourself, Oniwabanshuu scum."

With that, he charged. Aoshi met his attack easily, deflecting Toushi's flying blades with minimal effort. The wound on Aoshi's chest was long, but shallow enough to be of little consequence. Toushi, on the other hand...

\_He's losing strength and speed because of that stomach wound. I'd best take the advantage quickly...\_

Aoshi spun out of the way of Toushi's Onmyou Kousa, then launched himself back at his opponent, aiming for his exposed neck with a Goukou Juuji. But as Aoshi's kodachi scissored toward their target, Toushi flipped one blade over in his hand, using the hilt to block the attack by jamming it into Aoshi's oncoming blades. Toushi then swung his free sword around with all his strength into Aoshi's undefended left arm, growling in satisfaction as he felt the blade slice deeply into flesh and muscle.

Aoshi felt pain for only an instant before his entire arm went numb, his sword sliding out of his useless left hand and clattering to the ground. Heedless of his wound, Aoshi pushed his remaining blade hard

against Toushi's upraised hilt, knocking the sword from Toushi's grip, then drove his elbow into Toushi's bleeding stomach. Toushi staggered backward, doubled over, his mouth open in a silent scream of agony. Aoshi danced away from him, breathing heavily, his eyes slits of cold blue fire.

Sano winced as he watched the strike to Aoshi's arm. \_Shit... that's gotta hurt... and now Shinomori can only use one sword. Might be time for reinforcements...\_

Sano had barely inched forward when Kenshin extended his arm in front of the street fighter. "Wait," he ordered quietly. "Aoshi is equally skilled with a single kodachi... and his opponent is losing strength. The fight isn't over yet."

Sano grinned down at his friend. "You sound more like yourself now," he said. "I was worried for a minute."

Kenshin smiled slightly as they watched Aoshi point his sword at Toushi, raising it to eye level.

"This is your final chance, Toushi," he said coldly. "Give up now or prepare for death."

Toushi slowly straightened, flicking the blood from his sword as he hissed through clenched teeth --

"Never. I will avenge my father... even if it costs me my life!"

Toushi sprang toward Aoshi as he uttered the last word. \_Kaiten Kembu Rokuren,\_ Aoshi thought. \_But his speed's been halved... this may be the perfect time for -- \_

Toushi's eyes widened as his target faded from view... then reappeared in a shifting blur all around him. "What the hell?" he sputtered, his eyes darting wildly. In his confusion, Toushi lowered his kodachi slightly for the space of a heartbeat.

It was more than enough of an opening. Aoshi bared his teeth as he broke from the flowing movement of Ryuusui no Ugoki and slashed his single sword across Toushi's chest with all his might... once... twice... three times in the blink of an eye. Blood sprayed from the wounds as Toushi gasped --

"No... can't lose... to you... now..."

Toushi crumpled to the ground.

Sano let out a long breath, and Kenshin dropped his hand from his sword. "Well done, Aoshi," Kenshin said solemnly as he and Sano jumped down from the porch and approached the wounded okashira.

Aoshi didn't reply. He approached Toushi, studying him carefully. "He's still breathing," he said flatly, his hand tightening around his sword hilt.

"I'm glad," Kenshin said, a subtle note of command in his voice. "I would rather you didn't kill him. Better that he lives to answer to

the police for his crimes."

Aoshi paused, then nodded curtly. The three men froze as they heard a faint voice calling Kenshin's name.

"That's Kaoru," Kenshin said, glancing worriedly at Sano.

"Go ahead," the taller man said with a reassuring smile. "I'll make sure things are taken care of here."

"Arigatou, Sano," the red-haired swordsman replied, running toward the back of the building. The street fighter turned to Aoshi, who stood like a statue over his fallen opponent, blood dripping from the fingers of his wounded arm.

"Oi, Shinomori, your arm looks bad," Sano said, moving closer to Aoshi. Sano stopped in his tracks as Aoshi held out his sword to block his path.

"It's fine," he said coldly. "Don't concern yourself with me."

"I couldn't care less about you," Sano retorted hotly. "But I promised Misao I'd bring you back to her... and I'm sure she'd rather you be alive than dead."

Aoshi stared at Sano blankly. "Why?" he asked.

"Eh?"

"Why did you promise Misao that?" Aoshi asked, his brow furrowed.

Sano looked away from Aoshi, studying one of the kodachi lying on the ground near Toushi's crumpled form. Sano bent down to pick it up, brushing the dirt off its hilt, which glimmered in the fading late afternoon light. \_Misao's kodachi... or one just like it.\_

\_Misao...\_

Sano closed his eyes, dozens of images of Misao filling his mind... her eyes, sparkling with mischief and life... her laughing face as she sparred and teased and flirted with him... the ardent way she returned his kisses, murmuring his name like the sweetest of endearments...

\_Misao... how can I let you go? I love you...\_

Sano then recalled her tear-streaked, anguished face as she watched Aoshi leave to follow Toushi. His eyes snapped open resolutely.

\_But you still love Shinomori... so it's hopeless.\_

Sano raised his eyes to Aoshi's again, speaking quietly --

"I promised her that because she would've blamed herself had you died in this fight." He looked away from the onmitsu again, adding gruffly --

"And because... for some reason I'll never understand... she still loves you."

Sano watched furtively as Aoshi's ice-blue eyes darkened with a feeling the street fighter couldn't quite put his finger on. \_So... you \_\_do\_\_ care for her... as much as a cold-blooded asshole like you can care for anybody. Then I've made the right choice... no matter how much it hurts...\_

Forcing a nonchalant expression, Sano flipped the kodachi over in the air, catching it by its hilt. "I still don't understand what this was all about," Sano said lightly. "What happened between you and this Makimachi Taki guy anyway?"

Aoshi inclined his head slightly as he stared at Sano, considering whether he should bother to answer. \_I suppose it doesn't really matter if he knows... perhaps he can help Misao understand, when the time comes to tell her...\_

"After our okashira's death, Makimachi Taki and his mother challenged Okina's decision to appoint me okashira in Okina's place," Aoshi replied. "Makimachi Taki challenged me for the right to head the Oniwabanshuu, and I accepted. We fought, and I defeated him... but as I turned and walked away from him after the fight had ended, my defeated opponent pulled a knife out of his boot and threw it at my head. Hannya saw what Makimachi Taki was up to and knocked me out of the way, suffering a wound to his shoulder as a result."

Aoshi almost smiled as he remembered what Hannya said as Aoshi helped him to his feet...

\_// I guess I don't need to tell you that you will always have my support... okashira... //\_

A familiar pang of remorse gripped Aoshi as he remembered Hannya's steadfast loyalty. His voice grew colder as he continued --

"I then banished Makimachi Taki from the Oniwabanshuu... and told him if he ever returned, he would be killed on sight. He protested, appealed to his allies in the Oniwabanshuu to support him. But they turned away, having seen him for what he really was... a cowardly bully without any honor --"

"Liar!"

Sano and Aoshi stared in amazement at Toshi, who had somehow managed to stand again, despite the puddle of blood he'd left on the ground. He brandished his single kodachi, yelling --

"My father wasn't like that! Obaa-san told me... she said he wasn't like that before! You made him that way!"

With impossible speed, he hurled himself at Aoshi. Sano tried to step in front of the wounded okashira, but Aoshi shoved Sano out of the way with his good shoulder. Caught by surprise, Sano tumbled to the ground.

"Don't interfere, Sagara," Aoshi growled as his blade met Toshi's with a resounding clang. \_This is \_\_my\_\_ fight... and this time I'll end it \_\_my\_\_ way... Himura's nonkilling vow be damned...\_

Sano scrambled to his feet, his stomach curling as he saw the wild gleam in Toushi's dark eyes. \_Kuso... they're just like Yukishiro Enishi's eyes... completely insane. His thirst for revenge has pushed him past his body's limits... which makes him even more dangerous now than before...\_

"Teme," Toushi spat as he launched a series of frenetic close-range attacks. "My father would have led the Oniwabanshuu with pride and honor... but you stole that birthright from him and drove him away from the only family he knew, even as he begged you to show him mercy."

Aoshi's blade chimed continuously as he parried Toushi's blows, breathing hard as he replied between attacks --

"Your father never begged me for anything... it was his allies to whom he directed his pleas. After I banished him, he spat at me and told me he'd sooner die than return to the Oniwabanshuu... and that he would see us all in Hell. I wouldn't classify that as begging for mercy."

"Uruse!" Toushi shouted. He smashed his free fist into Aoshi's jaw, then kicked him in the chest, sending him reeling backward. Toushi's eyes glowed red as he leapt into the air, roaring --

"Die, Shinomori! Kaiten Kenbu -- Tengeki Kourin!"

Toushi descended as fast as lightning upon the crouched onmitsu, grinning evilly as he brought his sword down on Aoshi's bowed head... which flickered, then vanished. Toushi growled with frustration as his blade cleaved empty air instead of Aoshi's skull.

"Damn you!" Toushi shrieked, whirling around, his blade flailing harmlessly through the host of Aoshi-images slowly circling him. "Stop hiding behind your fucking Oniwabanshuu tricks and show yourself, you coward!"

"Gladly," Aoshi snarled, materializing directly in front of Toushi and plunging his kodachi through Toushi's stomach, burying it to its hilt. Toushi uttered a guttural moan, blood bubbling from his mouth. His dark eyes watered as they met Aoshi's fierce, triumphant blue gaze.

"Fucking bastard," Toushi croaked, his voice audible to Aoshi alone. "You think... you've won... but I'll have... my vengeance... yet..."

Toushi's eyes glazed over as he emitted a final, rattling breath, his face frozen forever in a vacant, slack-jawed stare. Aoshi wrenched his sword from Toushi's body, which slumped lifelessly to the ground. The victorious onmitsu calmly wiped his blade clean against his trouser leg, fighting the sudden wave of dizziness that swept over him.

"Che, Shinomori... you're one tough asshole," Sano said with an appreciative grin. "Remind me never to piss you off."

Before Aoshi could stop himself, he retorted --

"You piss me off just by breathing, Sagara."

Sano stared at Aoshi, who punctuated his comeback with a Saitou-like smirk. Sano grinned in response.

"Heh... Toushi must've knocked your brains loose. You're almost acting like a normal guy," he said cheerfully, picking up Toushi's bloody body and throwing it over his shoulder. "C'mon... we'd better get this bastard outta here before Kenshin gets back and kicks your ass for killing on his property."

Aoshi nodded and turned to follow Sano. He made it about halfway to the doujou gate before another flood of disorienting nausea sent him stumbling to his knees. His whole body broke out in a cold sweat as he tried to force his twitching limbs to obey him and move forward. He could barely hear Sanosuke shouting his name, could barely feel the ex-gangster shaking his good shoulder as his body grew numb and distant. As darkness enveloped his mind, Aoshi managed to whisper --

"Sagara... tell Misao... not to cry for me anymore."

Aoshi could hear Misao's laughter, as sweet and clear as the bubbling brook near their home in Kyoto. He sighed, smiling as the blackness fully claimed him --

\_Yes... be happy... my Misao...\_

.....

Misao slowly became aware of a warm hand pressing against her forehead, then her cheeks. She sighed as she felt fingers skimming through her hair, gently stroking it back from her face.

"Sano," she murmured, her eyes fluttering open. "Please tell me it's you."

"Aa," Sano replied with a broad smile, resting his hand against the side of her face. "It's me, kirei."

Misao threw herself into his arms with such force that she nearly knocked Sano over. "Whoa, Misao... careful," he said, his voice rippling with laughter. "You'll break the rest of your ribs if you don't watch it."

"Yokatta," Misao whispered, relief bathing her body like a healing salve. "Sano... I was so worried..."

Sano held her silently for a moment, feeling a bittersweet mixture of pleasure at her concern for him... and regret that he had such grim news to give her.

"I'm fine, Misao," he said. "Shikashi..."

Misao lifted brimming eyes to his, her voice trembling as she asked --

"Aoshi-sama... is... is he... dead?"

"Iya," Sano replied, his eyes somber. "But it looks bad for him."

Toushi's blades were poisoned... and the doctors haven't been able to identify the type of poison he used. Even Kenshin and Saitou are stumped... they say it must be a poison known only among onmitsu. You wouldn't happen to know --"

"No," Misao replied miserably, blinking back her tears. "I never learned about poisons. Jiya said there was no place for such dark onmitsu arts in Meiji." Misao took a deep breath, steeling herself against the pain it caused her... and fighting to keep her feelings of hopelessness at bay.

"Jiya would know, but he's too far away. He'll never make it in time," she said. "What about Toushi? Surely Saitou can make him tell us..."

"He's dead," Sano said, unable to keep his satisfaction from showing. "It doesn't matter anyway. Believe me, Misao... he would've died before he gave us the antidote. He hated Shinomori the way Yukishiro Enishi hated Kenshin..."

Misao closed her eyes as despair threatened to overwhelm her once more. \_Dame! I swore I wouldn't let you win, Toushi... there has to be another way...\_

Misao's eyes flew open. "Of course!" she said aloud. "Sano... where is Unmei-sensei?"

"In a cell at police headquarters... Saitou says she's pretending to be senile to keep from answering their questions," Sano said, frowning as Misao slowly swung her legs over the side of the bed. "Misao, where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I have to see her," Misao said, pausing as she waited for her vision to clear. "She won't talk to them... but she'll talk to me. I'm sure of it..."

"But... your injuries --" Sano protested, falling silent under Misao's ferocious glare.

"I won't just let Aoshi-sama die, Sano," she said fiercely. "If there's the slightest chance I can persuade Unmei-sensei to save him, I have to try. I'd never forgive myself otherwise..."

Sano felt his throat tighten. He looked away from Misao, murmuring --

"You would risk your own safety for him... you love him that much."

Misao's feet touched the floor. She swayed as she took her first step, and Sano reached out to steady her. She gripped his arms tightly, her shining eyes locked on his as she said --

"Hai. I love him that much, Sano... almost as much as I love you."

Misao had a sudden urge to giggle uncontrollably at the dumbstruck look on Sano's face. \_Gods, how is it possible to feel so happy and so sad at the same time?\_ she wondered guiltily, shaking her head to clear her thoughts.

"Mou ii," she said firmly. "Sano, get me my clothes and help me get to Unmei-sensei. We haven't a moment to spare."

Sano handed Misao her uniform silently, so deep in thought that he barely registered the fact that Misao had stripped her yukata off in front of him, presenting him with an unimpeded view of her bare rear end before pulling her shorts up.

\_Can it be true? Or was I just hearing things? She said she loves me... but is she just humoring me to get me to help her save Shinomori? No, Misao isn't devious like that... well, maybe sometimes... but...\_

"Sano," Misao prompted, her weak voice snapping him out of his trance. She'd made it as far as the doorway before succumbing to another dizzy spell, sinking to her knees, the room spinning crazily.

Without a word, Sano swept her into his arms and carried her out of the room, bracing himself for the inevitable arguments they'd have to face from Megumi and Saitou...

.....

Misao took a deep, steadying breath as she paused before the door to the cellblock. She looked up at Sano, who had his arm around her for support.

"Misao, promise me you won't get your hopes up," Sano said, dropping his arm from her waist and taking her hands in his. "She was the mastermind behind all this, remember? She hates Shinomori as much as Toushi ever did..."

"I know," she said, squeezing his hands. "Don't worry about me, Sano... I'll be fine. Saitou will be watching... he'll keep Unmei-sensei from pulling any tricks."

Saitou snorted. "For all the good it will do," he said, dropping his cigarette to the floor and stepping on it before taking Misao's elbow.

"Your presence is no longer required, ahou," the inspector said to Sano, smirking as he glared pointedly at Saitou's gloved hand resting in the crook of Misao's bare arm.

"Oi, teme... there's no need for you to touch her," Sano growled.

"Sano," Misao said warningly. Sanosuke pouted as he spun away from them and stomped down the corridor, muttering something about old yellow-eyed wolves needing to keep their paws to themselves.

Misao bit her lip to keep from laughing out loud at Sano's ludicrous notion. Her mood grew serious again as Saitou unlocked the cellblock door and slowly escorted her through it. Misao glanced sideways at Saitou's scowling face, still baffled by how readily he had accepted the idea of her speaking with Unmei. It had been Saitou who had silenced the doctors' objections to her plan in his usual blunt, sarcastic manner --



\_// If any of you have a better idea for saving Shinomori's hide, by all means, share it with us. //\_

Of course no one had replied. Misao shook her head wonderingly. \_Never thought I'd see the day when I'd actually be grateful to Saitou for being such a jerk...\_

Misao yelped as she stumbled over a stone poking up through the dirt floor of the cellblock. Her stomach lurched as Saitou caught her firmly by the waist, stopping her fall but sending sharp stabs of pain through her injured ribs. Misao braced herself for the inevitable cutting remark that would follow.

"Be more careful," Saitou said gruffly, setting her on her feet and taking her elbow again.

Astonished, Misao blurted --

"Why are you being so nice to me? What's in it for you?"

Saitou regarded her with a narrow-eyed frown. "If you need to ask that, then your training has been even more pitiful than I imagined," he scoffed. "And as far as being nice to you... you're mistaking civility for kindness."

"Since when are you civil to anyone?" Misao muttered as they continued walking. They stopped in front of a cell at the end of the corridor. Misao could tell there was someone in the cell, though she couldn't make out any facial features in the dank gloom.

Saitou unlocked the cell door, and opened it, allowing Misao to slip inside. She jumped as Saitou shut the door with a clang behind her, and trembled as she heard the rasp of the lock sliding home. Saitou then struck a match, lighting a lantern that he'd taken down from the far wall, and hung it on a hook in front of Unmei's cell.

Misao blinked in the flickering light, which illuminated Unmei's pale, wrinkled face and vacant eyes. The old woman regarded Misao silently, giving no sign of awareness or recognition.

Saitou emitted a low, malicious chuckle as he said --

"A dozen of my best men have failed to pry that clamshell open. Let's see you try, weasel girl... it should be amusing, if nothing more."

Misao whirled around, an angry retort on her lips... and saw that Saitou had disappeared. She shuddered, knowing that Saitou was hidden somewhere nearby, but still feeling nervous and alone.

"Heh... I believe that Miburo bastard has taken a liking to you, Misao-chan."

Misao turned shocked eyes onto Unmei, whose blank face had suddenly come to life, her black eyes glittering.

"Well, well... a visit from my lovely young granddaughter," Unmei purred, slowly rising to her feet. "This is most unexpected..."

-- End of Chapter 19 --

## 20. These Changing Times

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^\_^;;

**\*\*Note:\*\*** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

**\*\*Chapter 20 -- The Web Unravels\*\***

"Well, well... a visit from my lovely young granddaughter," Unmei purred, slowly rising to her feet. "This is most unexpected. To what do I owe the pleasure, my dear?"

Misao studied Unmei's darkly triumphant expression. \_She knows... so there's no use playing games with her.\_

"You know why I'm here... obaa-san," Misao said, her voice strong and steady. "So let's dispense with the pleasantries, shall we?"

A malevolent grin spread across Unmei's face. "By all means," she said. "So... my Tousei accomplished his mission, and now your okashira is dying."

Unmei's eyes glinted with satisfaction at Misao's stony-eyed glare. "Poor man," Unmei said in a syrupy tone. "Poisoning can be such a dreadful way to die... if the mix is right. Is he in a great deal of pain? I do hope so..."

"Enough," Misao snapped. "You may as well tell me what poison Tousei used... it might persuade the police to go easier on you."

Unmei snorted. "You'll have to do better than that, Misao-chan," she said. "For thirteen years my fondest wish has been for Shinomori Aoshi's death... and now it's about to be fulfilled. What can you offer that would make me give up my heart's desire?"

"The police'll find the poison... maybe even the antidote," Misao said quickly. "They're tearing your doujou apart right now, looking for evidence against you..."

"They'll find none," Unmei said with a self-satisfied look. She tapped her skull with one wizened finger. "All onmitsu know the best place to store secret information is here, where no one can lay their hands on it. My memory is filled with secrets... all locked up tight. And unlike a door or chest, there is no key that can unlock a strong-willed mind."

Misao's fingers twitched involuntarily as she imagined herself hurling a handful of kunai at the old woman's gloating face. She swallowed her irritation, deciding to use a different weapon.

"I'm surprised you haven't asked about Toushi, obaa-san," she said quietly.

The victorious gleam in Unmei's eyes vanished as if blown out like the flame of a candle. "There's no need," she said, her voice sounding weak and old. "I know my grandson... Shinomori would already be dead if Toushi were still alive."

Misao bowed her head. "Gomen nasai," she said. "I know you'll find it hard to believe... but I really am sorry."

Unmei stared at her, her lips pressed so tightly together they almost disappeared. "He tried to kill you, child," she said harshly. "He showed you no mercy, even knowing who you were. I daresay he would have finished what he started had he survived his battle with Shinomori."

"I know," Misao said, raising her eyes to her grandmother's again. "But after you told me Toushi was my cousin, I recalled that he was always kind to me when I was a little girl. I'd rather remember him that way."

Unmei's jaw worked soundlessly, and for a moment Misao could swear she was on the verge of tears. But then the old woman cleared her throat, fixing her sharp dark eyes on her granddaughter.

"You would have made a terrible onmitsu, Misao-chan," she said, her voice slightly raspy. "Your compassion would have gotten you killed... not to mention your fellow agents..."

"Maybe so... in the old days," Misao said, smiling slightly. "But it's served me well in Meiji."

Unmei snorted, but Misao detected something resembling hope in her dark eyes. "I suppose it would be too much to ask for you to show the same compassion to your old grandmother," she said gruffly.

Misao studied Unmei gravely. "You're asking me to forgive you?" she said, frowning slightly.

Unmei nodded. "Not for what I did to Shinomori... I don't regret any of that," she said. "What I do regret is hurting you in the process. I never meant to, child."

Misao blinked her eyes rapidly to ward off another imminent flow of tears. "You don't understand," she said. "Aoshi-sama is my family, obaa-san, in all ways but blood. By hurting him, you hurt me..."

Unmei gritted her teeth. "Even now you still remain loyal to that dog?" she said incredulously. "How can you? He destroyed your true family..."

Misao's eyes blazed. "You keep saying that," she said heatedly. "But I still don't understand why you see things that way. Taki challenged Aoshi-sama and was defeated... then tried to kill Aoshi-sama when his back was turned. Some would say Aoshi-sama showed him mercy by banishing him... I know that our code demanded that Taki be slain as a traitor after what he did."

Unmei's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps it would have been more merciful if he had been," she snapped. "Taki was never the same after that night. He'd been groomed for the Oniwabanshuu since birth... he knew of no other way to support his family than through his sword. I did all I could to help him... I used some of our old connections to find him jobs guarding the ever-dwindling number of Bakufu officials, who feared for their lives as the Ishin Shishi took control of Kyoto, then spread eastward to Edo.

"Then one night, one of Taki's charges died at the hands of the Ishin hitokiri known as Shishio Makoto."

Misao's knuckles whitened as she clenched her fists. "Shishio..." she murmured, remembering the fearsome former hitokiri who, with his Juppon Gatana, had plotted to overthrow the Meiji government two years before.

"You knew Shishio Makoto after his... accident," Unmei said, shuddering. "He was even more skilled in his hitokiri days. I still don't know how Taki managed to escape... he showed up at sunrise, covered in blood and pale as death, and refused to discuss what had happened with any of us. After that, no one would touch him... he'd developed a reputation as a coward who was more interested in saving his own skin than those he was supposed to be protecting."

Unmei's voice grew strained. "By that time, his wife had died giving birth to their second child... and the baby followed the mother a week later. No matter how hard I tried to lift Taki from his despair, his spirit was broken. He took to drinking... then turned to opium. He died of an overdose just after Tousei's eleventh birthday."

Misao swallowed, feeling both sorry for Taki and furious with him for throwing his life away. "Is that when you and Tousei moved to Tokyo?" she asked.

"Yes," Unmei said, sighing. "Tousei was a handful... neglected and bitter... so I turned to my old onmitsu training to try to instill some discipline in the boy, as well as earn a living for us both. It worked beautifully. By the time Tousei was fourteen, I could see that he would be a far better swordsman than his father. The boy was relentless... always pushing himself harder and higher... and there was a ruthlessness to him that his father had lacked."

Unmei's eyes glittered. "That's when it hit me... the way to avenge my son's dishonor at the hands of Shinomori Aoshi and the rest of the Oniwabanshuu," she said. "I would create my own version of the Oniwabanshuu... but without the moral trappings that restrained their power in the final days of the Bakufu. And Tousei would be their

okashira... and, eventually, my instrument of vengeance."

Misao gritted her teeth. "So... you twisted him into something hateful and evil," she hissed. "How could you do that to your own grandson?"

"His heartlessness didn't come from my upbringing, Misao-chan," Unmei retorted. "He was that way since childhood... I merely taught him to use it to his advantage."

"And yours," Misao added in a rush.

Unmei smiled sardonically. "True enough," she said. "But he never objected. He was grateful to be of use, especially if it meant eventually having the chance to avenge his father's memory."

The old woman fell silent. Misao stared at the floor, hating herself for the question she was about to ask. \_But I have to keep her talking... for Aoshi-sama's sake... and besides, I really want to know...\_

"Obaa-san... why did you leave me behind that night?" she asked softly. "I was your blood, yet you left me with your greatest enemy. Why?"

Unmei's beadlike eyes widened slightly. "Oh, child," she whispered, reaching out to Misao, who reflexively backed against the bars of the cell door. "I tried to take you with us... but that old fool Okina stopped me. He told me I had no right to take you... that he would die before he would let me leave with you. He had Shinomori's backing, of course, so there was nothing I could do but leave you behind."

Unmei held up her hand as Misao opened her lips to ask another question. "I know... why didn't I ever contact you?" she sighed. "There was no point, Misao-chan. I suspected Okina wouldn't even let my messages get through to you, and the Oniwabanshuu never left you alone outside the Aoiya, not even for a second." Her voice grew hoarse. "I followed you sometimes when I still lived in Kyoto, to see if there was any way I could steal you away from them. But..."

Misao stared as the old woman's voice trailed off, her eyes suspiciously bright. Unmei swiped at her eyes and continued in a faltering tone --

"You were always so happy when I saw you... laughing and chattering with the people you were with. And I knew you probably wouldn't remember me at all, even if I could get close enough to snatch you from your keepers... you might have cried or screamed for help. It would have been too risky. So I left you alone."

Misao felt her own eyes grow hot as she imagined what her life would have been like had her grandmother taken her away from her Oniwabanshuu family. "I'm glad you did," she whispered. "I know you hate the Oniwabanshuu, obaa-san... but they raised me well. They've given me the best life I could have had without my parents. Jiya is like a father to me... the others like my siblings... and Aoshi-sama..."

She couldn't go on. The tears spilled down her cheeks again as she sank to her knees, her head swimming. "Onegai," she entreated, swiping her eyes with balled fists. "Obaa-san... I'm begging you... as one who shares your blood... please tell me..."

Unmei approached Misao slowly until she was standing directly in front of the kneeling onmitsu. "I don't know which poison... or poisons... Toushi used," she said, her dark eyes locked on Misao's pleading blue gaze. "That secret died with him. But I do know this much... regardless of which he chose... there is no remedy."

Misao could swear she heard her heart stop, could feel the blood drain away from her head and down through her body into her feet.

"Uso," she whispered, her face pale as rice flour.

"It's true," the old woman said, frowning as if she were scolding Misao during training. "Do you think onmitsu play games with such things? Our arts aren't meant to be reversed. If we want someone dead... they die."

"Then... it is... hopeless..." Misao said in a choked voice, her tears beginning afresh. \_Aoshi-sama... I've failed you... again...\_

Unmei studied her granddaughter gravely as she struggled to contain her anguish. Several long, silent minutes passed, marked only by Misao's muffled gasps as she swallowed her sobs and screwed her eyes shut to stop the crying. Then the old woman nodded slightly, as if she'd decided something, and said --

"Not necessarily, Misao-chan."

Misao's eyes snapped open. "Nani?" she croaked.

"Killing poisons are very difficult to obtain," Unmei said. "I haven't seen or mixed one since your grandfather's time. And since Toushi didn't have the patience to study such painstaking arts... I'm sure he merely took one of the premixed poisons I kept on hand, as he often did before a fight." She looked at Misao meaningfully, adding --

"They aren't meant to be deadly... only to stun and disable. But used in the wrong combination... there's just no telling. Your accursed okashira might fight them off... or he might not. There's nothing more that can be done. It's up to him now."

"Up to him..." Misao repeated softly, her red-rimmed eyes bright with hope.

Unmei shook a finger at Misao. "I didn't tell you this to give you false hope," she said severely. "And don't think I've changed my mind about wanting Shinomori dead."

Misao gazed up at her grandmother in puzzlement. "If that's so, obaa-san... why did you tell me this?" she asked.

Eyes warm with affection, Unmei reached out and stroked Misao's cheek. The young woman flinched, but didn't pull away.

"Step back from the girl immediately, Takashi Unmei," a voice suddenly intoned.

Misao jumped to her feet. Unmei's eyes flashed as she peered over Misao's head into the dimly lit corridor. "Meddling Miburo," she hissed. "I should have known you were spying on us."

"Yare, yare," Saitou sighed from the shadowed corner where he had concealed himself. He struck a match, lighting the cigarette that was already dangling from his lips. "I'm only here to make sure the weasel girl doesn't get taken hostage again," he continued, exhaling a long plume of smoke. "Your pathetic family squabbles don't interest me in the least."

Unmei glared furiously at Saitou, while Misao struggled to keep from hurling a sarcastic retort at the inspector.

Saitou's eyes gleamed with wicked amusement. "I'm pleased you seem to have recovered yourself, Takashi Unmei... now you can answer some of my questions," he said, smirking as he unlocked the cell door and motioned to Misao. "I'll have my men come for you momentarily."

Reluctantly, Misao rose to her feet and slipped through the opening, turning for one last look at her grandmother as Saitou locked the cell door. The old woman stared after her, her expression one of longing and regret.

"Sayonara, my granddaughter," Unmei said, raising one trembling hand.

"Sayonara, obaa-san," Misao replied somberly, feeling sorrow sweep over her as she took Saitou's arm. \_Obaa-san... Tou-nii... such a damned waste. If only things had been different...\_

.....

Sano tucked a stray corner of blanket snugly around Misao's sleeping form, his hand lingering on her covered shoulder. After they'd returned from the police station, it had taken a heated argument and some of Megumi's medicinal tea to get Misao to calm down enough to fall asleep. She'd insisted on seeing Aoshi as soon as she and Sano had crossed the clinic threshold, and had been preparing to watch over him for the rest of the night before Sano and Megumi intervened.

\_... If I talk to him, maybe he'll hear me... maybe I can call him back from wherever he is right now ...\_

\_... Misao-chan! You have \_\_got\_\_ to rest, or you won't recover from your injuries! You must go to bed this instant ...\_

\_... Listen to the fox-lady, Misao. Shinomori wouldn't want you to make yourself sick over him ...\_

Misao had finally relented, though Sano thought her surrender was probably more due to the pain she was suffering from her broken ribs as she tried to sit upright by Aoshi's bedside. They had settled her

into a hospital bed and gotten her to drink the tea, but as Sano turned to leave, she had clung to him, begging him to stay until she fell asleep, and to wake her if there was any change in Aoshi's condition.

\_... Any change at all, Sano... even if it's for the worse... promise me ...\_

Sano had promised. Anything to put her mind at ease, to get her to rest her battered, weary body.

Sano watched Misao's sleeping face, his eyes narrowing slightly as she twitched, her lips tightening as if she were in pain. Her mouth moved soundlessly, forming words Sano couldn't quite make out. Sano ran his hand down her cheek and kissed her forehead, murmuring to her soothingly. Misao sighed and sank deeper into the bed with a faint smile.

\_That's it, my love... rest now... I only hope your troubles will be over when you wake again...\_

Sano stiffened as he heard Megumi clear her throat behind him. "Is she asleep?" she asked softly.

"Aa," Sano whispered, reluctantly turning away from Misao to face the female doctor.

"Come," Megumi said, motioning toward the door. "We should leave her alone... I don't have the energy to deal with her if she wakes up again."

Sano hesitated, frowning at Megumi as he struggled against his usual impulse to start arguing with her. \_Bossy fox... who the hell are you to give me orders?\_

Megumi's eyes hardened as if she'd heard Sano's thoughts. \_Baka tori... why can't you just listen to me for a change?\_

Suddenly, Sano's frown was replaced by a smirk. "Man, we never change, do we?" he muttered, striding past Megumi and out the open door. He paused in the hall as Megumi slipped out behind him and slid the door shut.

"I suppose not," she replied, a faint smile on her lips. "I'm going to make some tea... would you like some?"

Pleased by her peace offering, Sano decided to make one of his own. "Why don't you let me do that?" he said. "No offense, Megumi, but you look like you could use a break."

A small corner of Megumi's brain was indignant at Sano's suggestion that she might look as old and haggard as she felt, but at the moment, she was too tired to contradict him. She said, this time with a full-fledged smile --

"Arigatou, Sanosuke. I'll be in my office."

Sano returned her smile. "I'll be there in a minute," he said, heading down the hall to the back room where the kettle was kept. Megumi went to her office and set out two mats, sinking to her knees



upon one with a grateful sigh.

By the time Sano got back with the tea, Megumi was dozing, her head lolling forward so that her chin nearly touched her chest. She awoke with a start at the clatter of Sano setting the tea tray down on the floor between the two mats. He handed her a steaming cup, then settled himself on the mat across from her. Neither spoke for a time, though Sano watched Megumi closely as she sipped her tea, steadfastly avoiding eye contact.

"Where's your assistant?" Sano finally asked.

Megumi froze, raising startled cinnamon eyes to Sano's dark, probing gaze. "He's at home, getting some sleep," she said stiffly. "He'll be back in the morning to relieve me. Why?"

"Just curious," Sano said in that breezy, offhand tone that Megumi knew from experience was usually a prelude to some infuriating observation. She bit her lip to keep from encouraging him, but as long moments passed by and Sano continued to silently sip his tea, she finally burst out --

"If you have something to say, rooster-head, then just say it!"

Sano had to swallow his tea fast to keep from spitting it out in a burst of laughter. \_I forgot how much fun it is to get under her skin,\_ he thought without a shred of remorse. He set his cup down with mock solemnity, saying --

"I just thought it would've been nice if he'd offered to take your shift tonight, since you've been working so hard... but I guess it's none of my business."

"You're damn right it's none of your business," Megumi snapped. "And for your information, Tatsuya-san did offer to stay... but I told him it wasn't necessary."

"Oh," Sano said, his eyes glinting wickedly. "And Tatsuya-san, being the good little boy he is, did exactly what you told him to."

Sano could almost see steam pouring out of Megumi's ears. "He is not a little boy," she hissed through clenched teeth. "Though I suppose that's how you would see someone who actually treats people with courtesy and respect."

"No doubt about it, little Tatsuya's a well-bred young man," Sano replied, taking his cup and downing the remnants of his tea in one long gulp. He wiped his mouth with his hand, flashing his best bad-boy grin as he drove his barb home. "Congratulations, fox -- you've found your ideal man. He's got looks... manners... and he obeys your every command. So when's the wedding?"

Megumi dropped her empty tea cup onto the floor, and Sano braced himself for her physical assault. But instead of flying at him with pounding fists, she buried her face in her hands and burst into tears.

Sano swore loudly, then slid himself over to Megumi's side. "Aw, fox," he grumbled. "It was just a joke... don't cry..."

"N- no... you... ha- hate me," Megumi sobbed, her dignity forgotten. "I can't bl- blame you... but it still... hu- hurts..."

Sano flushed. \_No doubt about it... I am the world's biggest baka-yarou,\_ he thought with a wince. He put an arm awkwardly around Megumi's shoulders. "C'mon fox... I don't hate you," he said gruffly.

"You do!" she protested, shrugging his arm off. "You call me that awful name all the time... and you argue with everything I say..."

Sano felt a flash of anger, and before he could stop himself, he blurted --

"Why the hell do you care if I argue with you? You're always right... so it shouldn't be a problem..."

Megumi raised her face from her hands, and the hurt he saw in her tear-smudged eyes cut through Sano's anger. "I don't know why I care... but I do," she said, sniffing. "I want there to be peace between us, Sanosuke."

"I doubt that's possible, Megumi," he said, his kind tone taking the sting out of his words. "We're like sake and honey... we'll never mix well."

Megumi raised an eyebrow. "So which am I... the sake or the honey?" she quipped.

Sano chuckled. "You've got a pretty good sense of humor, sensei," he said. "It's nice to see you air it out once in awhile."

Megumi smiled weakly and swiped her eyes dry with her sleeve. When she raised her eyes to Sano's again, he inhaled deeply and said --

"Megumi... I'm sorry for being such a jerk just now... and for what happened when you left Tokyo. It's weighed on my mind all these years, but I was too stubborn to do anything about it."

"And I was too proud to admit that I was wrong, too," she said, her eyes downcast. "I'm sorry, Sanosuke. I was unforgivably cruel to you back then... but I hope you'll find it in your heart --"

"Don't worry about it," Sano interrupted in his offhand way. "You were pretty much on the mark with everything you said... so there's nothing to forgive."

Megumi grabbed Sano by the arm and twisted him around to face her. "Baka!" she scolded. "None of those things were true... well, maybe the jobless part... and the fighting part... but you've got a good heart, Sanosuke. And that's what truly counts in a person."

"Thanks, kitsu- I mean... thanks, Megumi," Sano said, flashing her a smile.

They sat side by side for a few moments more. Megumi glanced sidelong

at Sano's profile, noting his pensive expression. \_Thinking about Misao-chan again, no doubt. She may care deeply for Sano, but her feelings for Aoshi seem as strong as ever...\_

"It must be hard," she said unthinkingly.

Sano's head snapped around. "Nani?" he said.

Megumi colored. "Gomen... I shouldn't have..." she stammered, cursing herself for her lack of discretion.

"Well... you did, so spit it out, kitsune," Sano said, his eyes narrowed.

Megumi sighed. "I meant it must be hard for you... with Misao-chan being so distraught over Shinomori Aoshi," she said, watching his eyes.

Sano looked away, his mouth tight. "It's hard," he agreed. "But not for the reason you think. It's hard for me to see Misao in such pain... and know there's nothing I can do to change things for her. I can comfort her... wait with her... but if Shinomori dies..."

Megumi rested one of her hands over Sano's, which were tightly clasped around his knees. "She'll recover," Megumi said. "Especially since she has you."

"But she'll never be the same," Sano said, giving voice to the fear growing within him since he'd first told Misao of Aoshi's poisoning. "She'll blame herself, Megumi... no matter what anyone says... I know her. And then... what if she feels she doesn't deserve happiness after that? She'll be like Kenshin was... torturing herself over the past and setting herself apart from others."

"I think there's a big difference between Misao's past and Ken-san's," Megumi said dismissively.

"I know that," Sano snapped. "But it doesn't make Misao's pain any less real."

Megumi was silent for a moment before she continued in a gentler tone --

"Even if what you're saying is true... Misao is a very different person than Ken-san... she's used to being with people, not apart from them. If the worst does happen, she may need to be alone for awhile... but she'll be back."

She squeezed Sano's hand. "After all, Kaoru-san's love for Ken-san, and his for her, was strong enough to pull him away from that lonely path," she said with a knowing smile.

Sano nodded, afraid his voice would betray the uncertainty clogging his throat. \_Their love was strong enough... but ours? I wish I could be sure...\_

Megumi stretched and rose to her feet. "I'll look in on Misao, then I'm going to sleep for awhile," she said. "You're welcome to stay in one of the spare rooms."

"I'd prefer to stay in Misao's room, if that's okay," Sano said tentatively. "I won't bother her... I just want to be nearby in case she needs anything."

Megumi resisted the urge to remind Sano that it was hardly proper, even if Misao was injured, for them to spend the night in the same room. But Sano caught her raised eyebrow and sighed in exasperation.

"Yare, yare," he growled. "Fine. Can I at least have a room near hers?"

Megumi couldn't stop the foxlike giggle that bubbled up inside her. "Follow me," she said, leading the sulky street fighter to the room adjacent to Misao's. Just as he was about to close the door behind him, he turned and said --

"Na, Megumi... I meant what I said about Tatsuya being a nice guy."

Megumi's eyes skipped away from Sano's to study a point over his shoulder. "I know," she said. "But you're mistaken if you think there's anything between us."

"Liar," he said, a teasing sparkle in his eye. "I see the way you look at him... it reminds me of the way you used to look at Kenshin when you thought no one was watching."

"I... do... not!" she sputtered, blushing profusely.

"You do. And I'll tell you something else," Sano said with a broad grin. "I've seen him looking at you, too... and I don't mean the way a doctor examines his patients. He's got it bad for you, kitsune-onna... he's just too damn shy to do anything about it."

Megumi stared open-mouthed at Sano. As he slid the door shut, he gave her a salacious wink and a final piece of advice --

"You should start by giving him that really nice, soft kiss of yours... it sure worked for me."

Sano backed away from the door and counted to himself --

"Ichi... ni... san..."

Megumi burst through the door, her eyes flaming.

"Sa... no... suke!" she hissed in a barely restrained whisper. "Korosu!"

Sano darted around Megumi and raced down the hall, chuckling, as the doctor chased after him.

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Misao slept through that night and much of the next day. By the time she awoke, the shadows were growing long against the wall. For one disoriented instant, she thought she was at home in Kyoto and had

slept through her afternoon training with Aoshi.

"Aoshi-sama... gomen," she mumbled, rolling over and opening her eyes. Only when she saw the examining table across the room from her did she remember --

\_Oh no! Aoshi-sama... how long have I been...\_

She sat up abruptly, then cried out as the sharp movement sent a surge of nauseating pain through her torso.

In an instant, Sano was at her side, cradling her head as he helped lower her back onto the bed. "Gomen... I forgot," she murmured sheepishly as Sano smoothed her hair back from her face.

"You're sweating... here," he said, taking a cloth from a basin at Misao's bedside and wringing it out.

"Sano... how is Aoshi-sama?" Misao said, still a little breathless from the pain.

"He's alive... but he's still unconscious," Sano replied as he gently dabbed the cool, damp cloth over Misao's forehead and cheeks. "He no longer has a fever, and his heartbeat's strong... he just hasn't come around yet. Megumi said it's no cause for worry." \_Yet,\_ he added to himself, remembering how the doctor had said that there had been cases where patients hadn't ever awakened from such a deep slumber.

"Yokatta," Misao sighed, her eyes fluttering closed as Sano rubbed her face with a soft, dry towel. The tenderness in his gestures and the glow of love she'd seen in his eyes touched off a fierce yearning within Misao to be held... comforted... touched.

"Sano," she breathed as he set the towel aside. She reached up to brush his lips with her fingertips, her own parting slightly as he lowered his face to hers in response to her touch. He kissed her as if it was their first time... softly, carefully... inviting her response rather than demanding it. Misao threaded her fingers through Sano's wild mane, stroking his hair as she traced his slightly open mouth with the tip of her tongue. Sano hummed low in his throat, his lips parting fully, his hand slipping beneath Misao's head and cradling it as they kissed deeply. Misao moaned in protest as Sano pulled away from her mouth, dropping kisses along her jaw... down her neck... behind her ear... feeding the sweet ache of desire that temporarily masked the discomfort of her injuries.

"Aishiteru, Misao," he whispered ardently, pressing his cheek to hers, careful to keep his weight off her torso.

Misao tightened her arms around Sano's shoulders, reveling in the heart-swelling affection and pulse-pounding attraction only Sano could stir within her. "I love you, too, Sano," she said, planting a lingering kiss on his cheek.

Sano raised his face slightly, his eyes wary. "Honto?" he asked. "You're not saying that just because I did? It's all right if you don't, Misao... I mean... I know how you feel about Shinomori..."

Misao shook her head. "It's not the same thing," she said. "It's true... I will always love Aoshi-sama... but I see now that my love for him is still that of a little girl for the one she adores. That's why we'll never be anything else to each other."

She pressed her hand against Sano's mouth as he tried to interrupt her. Stroking his cheek, her eyes shining with happiness, she continued --

"My feelings for you helped me realize this. Since I returned to Tokyo, you've always treated me as a woman and an equal. No one else has ever treated me that way... not Jiya... not the Oniwabanshuu... certainly not Aoshi-sama. I know they all love and respect me, but they still see me as that child that they've coddled and spoiled and fussed over all these years. And I can't help but act that way around them because of it. Even with Kaoru-san... Himura... it's much the same."

Her voice deepened. "With you it's different, Sano... I've been able to be my true self... and you encourage me to be that way."

Sano nodded. "I feel the same way about you, kirei," he said, pushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Everyone has this picture of how I'm supposed to be... so I act like they expect me to. Only with you have I ever felt like I could be different... like I could be the person I am deep inside."

Misao smiled. "We're good for each other," she said.

"In more ways than one," Sano added with a sly grin, running a finger lightly over her lips. Misao nipped it playfully, giggling.

"True. I've never felt so... drawn... to anyone," she said, a faint blush staining her cheeks. "But it's more than desire." Her voice faltered. "I can't describe it... what I'm like inside when we're together... it's like the feeling I get when I hear beautiful music... or see a splendid sunrise..."

Sano's throat tightened. "I know exactly what you mean," he said hoarsely. "You bring me such joy... just being near you... it's hard for me to describe it because I feel like my words won't do it justice."

Misao's voice broke with emotion as she said --

"So... never doubt that you're the one I want, Sagara Sanosuke. No one else."

"Misao..." he whispered, kissing her forehead, her eyes. "I'm so glad... I love you so much..."

They were in the midst of another lengthy kiss when a loud whistle made them jump apart. They stared at the doorway, where a grinning Yahiko, a scowling Yutarou and a shocked Tsubame stood staring at them.

"Woo-hoo! Go Sanosuke!" Yahiko hooted.

"Damn, Misao," Yutarou grumbled. "I really thought you had better taste."

Tsubame just covered her mouth with her hand and shook her head.

"Che. Don't you brats ever knock?" Sano growled, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. The boys tumbled through the door, continuing to tease Sano mercilessly, while Tsubame hung back shyly, watching the embarrassed grin Misao wore fade as she became lost in thought.

"Misao-san?" the girl asked timidly, studying Misao's sober expression. "Daijoubu?"

Misao met Tsubame's eyes with a sad smile. "I'd be better if I knew for sure that Aoshi-sama was going to be all right," she said softly. \_Aoshi-sama... please... you have to recover. I can't accept any other possibility...\_

Tsubame laid her hand over Misao's with a comforting smile. "I've brought dinner from the Akabeko," she said brightly, holding up a large bag. "Let's eat... then you can visit him, ne?"

-- End of Chapter 20 --

## 21. These Changing Times

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^\_^;;

**\*\*Note:\*\*** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

**\*\*Chapter 21 -- Awakenings\*\***

Aoshi was enjoying the longest, most peaceful meditation of his life. He appeared to be floating in a warm, pearly gray mist, and wasn't conscious of there being anyone or anything else in the world but his own mind. He sighed deeply, basking in the contentment he felt. \_So this is inner peace... it's wonderful... everything I'd ever hoped for...\_

**\*\*Okashira\*\***

**\*\*Aoshi-sama\*\***

Suddenly, Aoshi was no longer alone. Floating in the air before him were four ghostly figures, all of which he instantly recognized. His heart jumped as he called their names --

\_... Beshimi ... Hyottoko ... Shijikou... Hannya ...\_

The spirits of Aoshi's old Oniwabanshuu comrades smiled.

\_... I can't believe it... am I dreaming? ...\_

**\*\*Iya, Aoshi-sama,\*\*** Hannya replied. **\*\*We're really here... as are you...\*\***

\_... Where? ...\_

**\*\*The shadowy realm between life and death.\*\***

Aoshi's stomach lurched.

\_... The fight... the poison... did it kill me? ...\_

**\*\*Not yet. But you are treading the line between worlds. You must choose between them soon... or the gods will make the choice for you...\*\***

Aoshi silently considered Hannya's words.

\_... If death brings the kind of peace I was experiencing just now, then I welcome it. Show me the way, Hannya ...\_

Hannya was silent a moment before replying, his respectful tone containing a hint of misgiving --

**\*\*Consider your choice carefully, Aoshi-sama. Think of those you'll be leaving behind.\*\***

Aoshi knew Hannya meant Misao. Her image danced in the air between them, laughing and bright... then flickered... and became Misao as she'd looked when he'd last seen her... bereft and weeping...

**\*\*She still cries for you, Aoshi-sama. Can you so willingly abandon her?\*\***

\_... Her tears will dry... especially since she has Sagara with her now. She'll soon forget me ...\_

**\*\*Are you sure?\*\***

A fifth figure emerged from the mist... a dark-haired young man wearing an old-style Oniwabanshuu uniform... his blue-green eyes narrowed with disapproval...

\_... Sorata-san? ...\_

**\*\*Aoshi... you promised me you'd always protect Misao.\*\***

\_... I've done my best, Sorata-san... and now she's a woman grown. She doesn't need my protection any longer ...\_



**\*\*That may be so... but have you thought of the hurt your death will cause her? She's lost everyone she's ever loved... to lose you as well will break her heart...\*\***

Aoshi felt a quick flash of anger.

\_... Must I always sacrifice my own desires for Misao? It's not fair...\_

**\*\*Of course it isn't fair, Aoshi. But you took on the responsibility... you can't just walk away and pretend there'll be no repercussions.\*\***

\_... Why not? Isn't that what you did all those years ago?  
...\_

Aoshi flinched inwardly, knowing he hadn't acted so hot-headed and unreasonable since he was a child under Akihito-sama's tutelage. He hasn't meant to... but in this realm, once a thought was formed, it was if it had been spoken aloud. There was no opportunity to weigh his thoughts, temper his emotions and choose his words carefully as he did in the waking world.

Sorata's eyes hardened briefly, then flickered with sorrow.

**\*\*True. But I had no choice in the matter... whereas you do...\*\***

\_... I don't understand... if you, Hannya and the others didn't have a choice in dying... then why do I? What makes me so special?  
...\_

**\*\*I can't answer that. I only know that you hold your fate in your own hands. And I'm asking you to return to the living... to my daughter. She needs you, Aoshi...\*\***

Misao's image appeared again, her tear-filled, jewel-like eyes beseeching him. Staring into their anguished depths, Aoshi felt the same uncomfortable sensation a request from Misao always raised within him... as if she was pulling a string firmly tied around his heart. He closed his eyes, frustrated that even beyond life, Misao should have such a hold over him.

\_... Damn you, Misao... why won't you leave me in peace?  
...\_

Sorata's thoughts intruded on Aoshi's, his mind's voice rich with amusement.

**\*\*Aoshi... I remember so well the day you first held my newborn girl in your arms and looked into her sweet eyes. In that moment, she seized your heart... and you've been fighting to wrest it away from her ever since.\*\***

As if underscoring Sorata's words, vivid memories danced through Aoshi's consciousness... Misao as a toddler, tottering after him as he tried to slip away to train with Akihito-sama... an eight-year-old Misao calling his name as she searched the Aoiya for him, while he frantically searched for a place to hide the sack he was packing for

his journey... Misao at 16, bringing him tea and a smile during his self-imposed isolation, cheerfully ignoring his obvious desire to be left alone with his remorse-filled thoughts...

He smirked suddenly.

\_... I should have known better, to think I could escape her. She's nothing if not persistent ...\_

He opened his eyes to see Sorata smiling at him.

\*\*You wouldn't love her as well otherwise. Admit it, Aoshi... you don't want her to leave you alone. That's what truly is keeping you from returning to her now... the fear of having to experience losing her to the love she bears for that young rascal Sagara.\*\*

Aoshi's brow furrowed.

\_... I know what you're suggesting. But it's not what you think. I do love her... but not in that way ...\_

\*\*Are you sure about that?\*\* Sorata quirked an eyebrow skeptically, and Aoshi flushed as he remembered that night in the Aoiya's courtyard. He all but stammered as he replied --

\_... All right... there have been moments when I thought I might feel... differently... about her. But they always pass ...\_

\*\*You still see her as a child.\*\*

\_... I think I always will. She's more like my imouto than anything else... it just seems... wrong, somehow... to love her any other way ...\_

\*\*Only because you feel unworthy of her.\*\*

\_... But I am ...\_

\*\*And because you are deathly afraid of losing control over yourself.\*\*

Aoshi was silent, not wanting to consider that possibility.

\*\*It's all right, Aoshi. Perhaps I'm just indulging a father's pride in his beautiful daughter... pride which cannot bear the thought that any man could resist her womanly charms.\*\*

Aoshi smiled slightly at that.

\_... You always were a philosopher, Sorata-san ...\_

Sorata chuckled, his eyes sparkling with mischief and amusement. He looked so much like Misao that Aoshi felt a painful twist deep within him. He imagined what she would be like without that smile... that sparkle... and knew the weight of grief from his death -- on top of the other losses she had experienced in her short life -- would inevitably dim her shimmering, joyful light.

In that moment, his choice became clear.

Sorata's smiled broadened as he raising a misty hand in farewell, his voice fading gradually as Aoshi felt himself floating away

--

**\*\*Yes... go to her. She's waiting for you...\*\***

.....

Megumi paused before the door to Aoshi's room, biting her lip as she wrestled with what to say to Misao about Aoshi's condition. She finally turned to the young woman who stood behind her, leaning against Sanosuke's sturdy side.

"Misao-chan," she said. "I'll be honest with you. Shinomori Aoshi is in a deep sleep... and he has shown no sign of stirring since Sanosuke brought him here three days ago. I don't want to trouble you... but..."

"His condition is serious," Misao said.

"Yes," Megumi said somberly. "Some people never awaken from a sleep like his." The doctor forced herself to brighten. "But there's always hope," she continued in what she hoped was a more encouraging tone. "His wounds appear to be healing... his breathing is even... and he no longer suffers from fever or irregular heartbeat. I just didn't want you to mistake his condition for a normal sleep."

Misao's lower lip trembled slightly. Sano tightened his grip around her shoulders, pressing her closer to his side. She looked up at him, forcing her usual optimistic smile.

"Arigatou, sensei," she said to Megumi. "I'm glad you told me."

Megumi smiled reassuringly. "Try talking to him," she said. "He seems to respond best to you. And there are some who believe that people can hear their loved ones even when unconscious."

Misao nodded as Megumi slid the door open. Sano helped Misao into the room, glancing quickly behind him. He wanted to kiss her before he left, but Megumi was watching them closely, and he didn't want to embarrass Misao. *\_Damned nosy fox,\_* he grumbled inwardly, grasping Misao's hands and squeezing them as he said --

"Just call for me when you're done, Misao. I'll be waiting down the hall if you need anything."

He turned to leave, but Misao surprised him by grabbing his sleeve and pulling him back to her.

"Chotto," she said sharply, standing on tiptoe and planting a loud, smacking kiss on his lips. "Promise you'll never leave me without a kiss, Sano," she murmured.

Megumi uttered a strangled cough, prompting Sano to flash a wicked grin in the doctor's direction. He then returned Misao's peck with a shamelessly voluptuous kiss that had both of them flushed and trembling by its end. "Is that what you had in mind?" he whispered in Misao's ear, making her giggle.

"I love you," she whispered back. "I'll see you in awhile."

"Count on it, babe," Sano said with his usual cocky wink. He brushed by Megumi, whose face was bright red, and said gruffly --

"Oi, fox... don't you have something better to do than spy on us?"

Megumi growled something unintelligible as she slammed the shoji shut, and Misao couldn't help laughing as she heard the doctor yell after Sanosuke --

"Baka! You're the ones making a public display of yourselves..."

\_Guess she's right,\_ Misao thought, feeling only the tiniest twinge of embarrassed guilt. She actually didn't mind Sano demonstrating his claim on her in front of Megumi -- it was further proof that the lovely female doctor no longer had any hold over him.

Misao approached Aoshi's bedside, her focus shifting to the purpose for her visit. She scrutinized his pale face, which wore a peaceful expression, as if he was meditating. His hair was tousled, falling carelessly across his closed eyes. Misao fought the urge she always had to brush his unruly bangs back from his face so she could try to read what little expression she usually found there. But he was deeply asleep... surely he wouldn't mind her tidying his hair a bit...

Biting her lip and glancing quickly around, Misao ran trembling fingers through the dark fringe framing Aoshi's, carefully combing it to the sides. \_His hair's so... soft. Silky, like mine. I always wondered...\_

Misao quickly dropped her hand, blushing furiously. \_This is no time to indulge in childish wishes...\_

"Aoshi-sama?" she said timidly, half-expecting his eyes to snap open and meet hers with his usual equanimity. "Can you hear me?"

Not so much as an eyelash twitched.

Misao sighed. "I know... I'm a fool," she said wearily. "All this time I kept thinking that when you heard my voice, you would wake up and everything would be okay again. Like some kind of magic bond between us would call you back to me. But it's not going to happen, is it?"

She bent over so that her face was nearly touching his. She could feel his faint breath warming her cheek, setting off the tiniest spark of hope in her heart. "Oh, Aoshi-sama," she whispered, impulsively pulling a leaden hand from under his blanket and clasping it tightly. "You are still alive. I can't give up hope... not yet. Please, Aoshi-sama... you have to live. Please come back."

Aoshi slept on, unmoved. Misao's voice quavered as she continued pleadingly.

"Aoshi-sama... there's so much I still need you to teach me. I know

if necessary I can be okashira again... I've done it before... but it would be so much better if you were here to train and guide me."

Misao's words began to blur together as tears streamed down her face.

"Aoshi-sama... there's so much to tell you... so much to explain. Gomen nasai... I thought... I mean... I do love you... I will always love you... but... but Sano... Sano and I..."

She pressed her face into Aoshi's chest, sobbing --

"I don't understand... Aoshi-sama... your face... what you said when you left the doujou... I was so confused... I thought for a moment... could you have changed your mind... about me... us?"

Did his breath catch? Misao couldn't be sure -- she was crying so hard she was gasping for air herself. Her broken ribs ached and burned terribly.

"But even if you have... I can't... it's too late..." Her voice gave out as another spasm of weeping shook her slender frame. "I don't want to hurt you, Aoshi... I'm so sorry..." she rasped. "But it doesn't mean... I don't still love... and need you. I know it's selfish... but you... you're my family... please..."

She wasn't sure how long she lay there crying before becoming aware of the hand gently resting on top of her head. Her sobs dried instantly, and she gaped in astonishment as she heard a voice murmur weakly --

"Misao... thought... I told you... not to... cry for me... anymore."

Misao lifted her head and found herself staring into Aoshi's familiar blue-gray eyes. With a choked cry, she flung her arms around his neck and pressed her damp cheek to his, her tears this time born of relief and joy.

Aoshi winced as Misao's enthusiastic embrace set off a host of aches from his various wounds. But instead of telling her to stop, he slowly slid his undamaged arm around her in a loose, tentative hug.

"Sumanai, Misao," he whispered. "I didn't mean to cause you such distress."

Misao smiled through her tears. "Daijoubu," she said. "You're going to be fine now... that's all that matters..."

Aoshi tightened his arm around her in reply. Misao suddenly felt her heart speed up -- she'd been so focused on her happiness at Aoshi's recovery that she hadn't fully realized that she was lying half on top of him in nothing more than her light yukata. And he was holding her there! \_How unlike him...\_

"G- gomen," she stammered, breaking the embrace. "I didn't mean to..."

"It's all right, Misao," Aoshi said. She thought she detected a note of amusement in his voice. "You should probably get the doctor anyway," he continued.

"Why?" Misao blurted anxiously. "Are you in pain? Do you feel sick? Can I get you anything?"

Aoshi clenched his teeth briefly to stifle the laughter tickling his insides. \_My poor weasel girl... she's so wound up she'll be chasing her tail in a moment.\_ "I'm fine," he said, his voice wavering slightly. "Just weak. How long was I unconscious?"

"A few days," Misao said. "We thought..."

Aoshi saw the tears threatening again and grabbed her hand. "I know," he said, squeezing it. "Go get the doctor, Misao... then I don't want to see you again until you've gotten a good night's sleep. You look exhausted."

"Datte... Aoshi-sama..." Misao pouted and rubbed her swollen, red-rimmed eyes in a way that reminded Aoshi of the toddler he used to soothe after numerous falls and scrapes.

"That's an order," he added sternly, steeling himself against her protests.

"Hai, hai," Misao grumbled, turning to leave. As she slid the door open, she looked back over her shoulder at Aoshi, who was still watching her.

"Nani?" he asked.

"I... just wanted to make sure that I wasn't dreaming," she said, her words tumbling over each other as she beamed at him, then darted out of the room, leaving the door open in her haste.

Aoshi closed his eyes, the ghost of a smile hovering over his lips.

.....

"Well, Shinomori-san, you're a lucky man," Megumi said as Tatsuya finished securing the bandage covering the wound across his chest. "With some rest and food, you'll probably regain your strength in a few days or so."

"What about this?" Aoshi managed to lift his left arm slightly. It was tightly bandaged and splinted to prevent movement. "It's not broken... why the splint?"

Megumi turned to set the bandages on a nearby table, considering how best to approach that subject. Her dislike for the cold, imperious onmitsu was as strong as ever, but even he deserved some consideration in the face of what she had to tell him. \_He's a blunt-spoken man... when he speaks at all. So I suppose I'd best be fully truthful with him...\_

She took a deep breath and addressed him gravely. "Your arm was cut nearly to the bone, Shinomori-san," she said. "Tatsuya-san and I did our best to repair what damage we could in surgery... but the wound

will take weeks to heal. And even if it does... there may be permanent damage to your muscles and nerves."

Aoshi's eyes narrowed as he assessed the doctor's words. "So... you're saying I might not be able to use the arm even after it heals?" he said.

Tatsuya glanced at Megumi before answering. "It's possible, Shinomori-san... but we consider it a slim chance at best that you'll lose its full use," he said confidently. "We think it far more likely that you might experience some minor limitations, like loss of strength or flexibility. You should still be able to perform everyday tasks -- even writing, if you do so with your left hand..."

Aoshi didn't even look at Tatsuya. His eyes remained fixed on Megumi as his voice grew colder --

"So... I will be able to feed and dress myself. But I will never be able to hold a sword again. Is that so?"

"Most likely," Megumi said, matching Aoshi's icy tone. "Not with that hand, at least. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"Chotto," Aoshi snapped, using his good hand to grab Megumi's arm so hard she cried out in surprise. "You can't leave until you answer my --"

"Oi! Get your hands off her!"

Megumi glanced to the side, half expecting to see Sanosuke standing beside her. Only it wasn't his voice she'd just heard.

It was Tatsuya's. He was standing close beside her, glaring fiercely at Aoshi, his hands clenched into fists and his face contorted with anger.

Aoshi regarded the slightly built doctor with cool amusement, loosening his grip on Megumi, who was so shocked at Tatsuya's uncharacteristic outburst that she made no move to extricate herself.

"And if I don't?" Aoshi said.

"You... you will answer to me," Tatsuya said hotly. "I understand you being upset... but you have no right to treat Megumi-sensei that way... especially after all she's done for you. You might have lost the arm completely if not for her skill as a surgeon. She's the finest doctor I have ever had the privilege of working with, and I will not stand here and watch you treat her with such disrespect."

The young man swallowed, and continued in a somewhat calmer voice.

"So... please remove your hand, Shinomori-san. Now."

Aoshi nodded slightly as he released Megumi's arm. "Gomen," he said to the flushed doctor. "The news was... surprising. I have some questions..."

"I will answer them as best I can," Megumi said shortly. "But not today. You need to rest."

Aoshi raised an eyebrow, and Megumi nearly smiled at his unspoken question.

"I know... it seems silly, after you've been unconscious for so long," she said, her voice somewhat warmer. "But you still have wounds that need healing, and rest is the best medicine for that. I'll be back tomorrow, all right?"

"Tomorrow, then," Aoshi said as the doctors took their leave. Megumi sighed, flicking her hair over her shoulder as she and Tatsuya walked down the hall.

"What a difficult man," she said. "I'll be glad when he's well enough to return to Kyoto."

Tatsuya scowled. "He's very ill-mannered for someone who spent time in the shogun's service," he said.

\_If only you knew the half of it,\_ Megumi thought with a mental shiver, remembering her dreadful time spent in servitude to Kanryuu. "We've never really gotten along," she said briskly. "But it's not a problem, really. He's far easier to deal with than that psychotic cop Sai-... I mean, Fujita Goro." She shuddered. "Now that would be my idea of a nightmare... having to treat him..."

"Megumi-sensei."

She smiled at Tatsuya. "Hai?"

"Why do they treat you that way?"

Megumi blinked. "Dare?"

Tatsuya's brow furrowed. "These men I've met since coming to Tokyo... Shinomori... Fujita... Sagara... they're all so rude to you," he said.

Megumi's heart sped up. "It's because I'm a woman-doctor," she said offhandedly. "Many men find that offensive... that I don't know my place. There are those in Aizu that treated me that way as well... remember?"

"Not like them," Tatsuya said, looking uncomfortable before continuing in a rush --

"Were they... did you... spurn them?"

Megumi stared at Tatsuya in astonishment... then burst out laughing. "You think... they sought to marry me?" she sputtered. "And I refused them? Oh, Tatsuya-san..."

"You're laughing at me," Tatsuya said, sounding miffed.

"No, no," Megumi said, still giggling. "It's the idea... of Shinomori... whispering endearments... and Saitou... courting anybody... I still can't believe he's married..."



"Who?" Tatsuya asked in confusion.

"Oh, never mind..." Megumi said, waving her hand. "Trust me, Tatsuya-san... whatever history we have, it definitely isn't romantic..."

"What about Sagara?"

Megumi's smile vanished. Tatsuya added hurriedly --

"Gomen nasai. I know it's none of my business..."

"True enough," Megumi said, not unkindly. "But I may as well answer you. Sanosuke and I... let's just say that whatever was between us is long past."

Tatsuya let out a breath. "Is there... anyone else?" he asked softly.

Megumi's own breath caught at the sudden hope that sprang into Tatsuya's soft brown eyes. Sanosuke's words floated through her mind --

\_... He's got it bad for you, kitsune-onna... he's just too damn shy to do anything about it... \_

"Iie. Doushite?" she asked, just as softly.

"Because..." Tatsuya began, his gaze dropping to Megumi's full red lips, which she licked nervously as he drew closer.

"Because?" she prompted, her eyelids dropping half-closed in anticipation.

"Megumi..." he whispered as his lips met hers.

A few minutes later, Sanosuke rounded the opposite corner... and stared at the foxy-doctor and her handsome assistant kissing in the hallway. He grinned. \_So... she took my advice... good move, Megumi. And lucky for me...\_

Keeping an eye on the pair, he made his way to Aoshi's door and slipped inside. He'd barely had time to slide the door shut when a cool voice intoned --

"What do you want, Sagara?"

Sano practically jumped out of his skin. "Che, Shinomori," he grouched, facing Aoshi. "You really know how to welcome visitors."

"You are not a welcome visitor," Aoshi said, frowning. "But I suppose it's best you're here. I have some things to say to you."

"Oh no you don't," Sano growled as he advanced upon the bedridden onmitsu. "I've got some things to say to you first... so shut up and wait your turn."

Aoshi quirked an eyebrow. "By all means... please continue," he said, inclining his head slightly.

Sano hesitated, thrown by Aoshi's gracious -- if subtly sarcastic -- response. "All right," Sano said. "I'm not much good with words, so I'll be plain -- Misao and I are in love."

Sano waited for a reaction from Aoshi, who remained silent, his face as devoid of feeling as always. The street fighter rolled his eyes and barked --

"Well?"

Aoshi shrugged slightly. "What do you expect me to say?" he asked mildly.

Sano's mouth dropped open in befuddlement. "I... don't know," he said, his brow wrinkling. "Guess I was expecting you to challenge me or something..."

Aoshi's eyes glinted. "Would you like a challenge?" he said, a hint of menace coloring his casual tone.

Sano bared his teeth slightly. "I knew it!" he snarled. "You are gonna try to make trouble between us. Teme... you tossed Misao aside easily enough when you were the only man she'd look at. But now she loves me in a way she never loved you... and you can't stand it."

Aoshi's mouth tightened. "You go too far, Sagara," he said, his voice as cold and sharp as the blades he used to slay Toushi.

"I always do," Sano said with a mirthless grin. "So I might as well say everything I came to say." He relaxed slightly as he continued in a more reasonable tone --

"I know Misao still adores you, and I can live with that. As long as you two are like family, I can stand it." His voice dropped an octave, his eyes narrowing to threatening slits. "But if you start playing with her feelings again... or ever give her anything more than a brotherly kiss on the cheek... I swear by everything holy I will do worse than kill you."

Aoshi bit the inside of his lip to stifle his scornful retort. \_Ignorant pup... I could kill you twenty different ways, and you wouldn't even live long enough to know you were dying.\_ He exhaled sharply through his nose. \_But still... there is Misao to consider.\_

Outwardly, he regained his composure. "I have no desire to hurt Misao," he said, pausing before adding meaningfully --

"Or to see her hurt."

Sano folded his arms, glaring at Aoshi. "I would never hurt her," he growled. "That's your specialty."

Aoshi chose to ignore Sano's insult, despite his growing urge to give the insolent boy the fight he was angling for. He took another deep, steadying breath and said --

"I have to wonder what your intentions are toward Misao. If it's

marriage you're seeking --"

Sano threw his shoulders back as he interjected --

"It is."

Aoshi's eyes glittered. "You do realize you are a completely unsuitable choice for a husband," he said, his voice tinged with condescension. "You have no family... no fortune... no gainful means of employment."

Sano ground his teeth, his eyes flaming. "Misao doesn't give a damn about any of that," he snapped. "In fact, she often reminds me that her situation in life is similar to mine."

"Misao is mistaken," Aoshi said firmly. "Her father's family is samurai, with a long and honored tradition of service to the shogun. Her grandfather was able to leave her a considerable amount of wealth, all carefully hidden to keep it safe during the wars. And her mother's family were merchants... they founded the Aoiya, and it was left to her after they died."

Sano gaped at Aoshi. "I thought... that was your place," he said.

Aoshi shook his head. "I prefer to let people think that, for Misao's safety," he said. "Okina and I agreed long ago to keep Misao's fortune hidden until the new era was firmly established. There was too much uncertainty in those days... too much random violence and thievery. Silence seemed to be the best protection at that time."

"So... Misao still doesn't know?" Sano asked, his cheeks slightly flushed.

"No. And I would prefer it if you allowed me to tell her," Aoshi said.

Sano nodded, his throat thick with apprehension. As much as he hated to admit it, he found the newfound knowledge of Misao's noble background and wealth thoroughly intimidating. He pictured the ramshackle farm where he'd spent his first eight years... the tiny village where his father and siblings still lived and struggled to eke out a meager existence.

\_Shinomori's right. I have nothing to offer Misao... I'm not fit to carry her bags, much less marry her.\_

When he was a boy with the Sekihoutai, Sano had grasped eagerly at the dream of equality Sagara-taichou had offered him. But he was well-aware of today's reality -- even though the Meiji government issued edicts abolishing the old class system, customs and rules of caste still applied when it came to making a marriage. Kaoru's marriage to Kenshin had rejected such conventions... but they hadn't had the pressure of family to contend with.

\_Shinomori's obviously against me... and Okina likely will follow his lead. They'll pressure Misao to refuse me and accept a better match.\_

Sano had a vision of Misao in wedding garb, kneeling beside a faceless rich man with fine silk robes. Then the man turned, showing Aoshi's face. Sano felt as if someone had ripped his heart out of his chest.

\_No! Right or wrong... good enough or not... I love her. I won't just walk away. This is Meiji... the old ways are changing. I'll earn the right to her hand.\_ He curled his lip at Aoshi. \_Then we'll see who's worthy, you smug bastard...\_

Sano spun around on his heel and stalked out of Aoshi's room without bothering to say goodbye. Aoshi couldn't suppress the sly smile that crossed his lips as he watched Sano's abrupt departure.

\_Well, Sagara... you've never backed down from a fight... we'll see how well you'll rise to this challenge.\_

-- End of Chapter 21 --

## 22. These Changing Times

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^\_^;;

**\*\*Note:\*\*** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

**\*\*Chapter 22 -- Arrivals and Departures\*\***

Sanosuke stepped back to survey the framework of what would soon be a row of shops. He grinned at Genji, who handed him a rag to wipe the sweat from his face.

"Not bad," Sano said, swabbing his face with the cloth.

"Nope," his beaming friend agreed. "Doumo, Sano... we've been able to take twice as many jobs since you starting working with us. With all this extra work, shutting down for the winter won't be a hardship."

Sano's grin grew wider. "I should be thanking you. It was about time I got a real job," he said with a wink. "Paying off my Akabeko tab last month wiped my winnings out... and I never had much luck at dice

anyway."

Genji chuckled. "You were born lucky at other things," he smirked, jerking his thumb in the direction of the street, where they could see Misao running toward them.

"Aa," Sano agreed heartily, slapping Genji on the back. "I'll be back in a minute."

Sano picked up his jacket and shrugged into it as he jogged toward Misao, his eyes narrowing as she slowed to a walk, clutching her side. It had been more than a month since the trouble with the Takashi family, and both Megumi and Misao insisted that Misao had fully recovered from her injuries. But Sano still found himself hovering protectively over Misao, scolding her when he caught her hefting a heavy rice bundle... or sparring too enthusiastically with Yahiko... or performing her ninja acrobatics to amuse the kids.

\_Che... I'm acting more like Kenshin every day,\_ he thought ruefully.  
\_Love does strange things to a man...\_

As he met Misao in the middle of the street, she grabbed his hands and squeezed them, her eyes shining with excitement. "Sano... it's time!" she said breathlessly.

"The babies...?" he gasped. Misao nodded, pulling him after her.

"C'mon..."

Sano shouted an apology back to Genji, who waved him away. "Heiki," he shouted back. "I'll see you tomorrow!"

Sano and Misao set off for the doujou at a brisk jog. "Isn't it still a little early?" he asked anxiously. "Will Jou-chan be okay?"

Misao nodded. "Kaoru-san's struggling a bit, but Megumi-sensei says she'll be fine," she said. "But still... it's hard to hear her crying out from the birthing pains and not worry. Himura's going crazy, too... Genzai-sensei told him he had to wait outside, and he's been pacing himself into the ground ever since."

"So... you want me to help distract him," Sano said with a brief grin as they approached the doujou's gate.

"Not just that," Misao admitted as they entered the yard. "I need to you distract me, too." She embraced Sano fiercely, murmuring into his chest --

"I'm scared, Sano... what if something --"

"Shh," he whispered soothingly as he held her. "Jou-chan's one of the strongest women I know. She'll pull through. And those babies... they're a mix of Kenshin and Jou-chan. How can they do anything but survive?"

He could feel Misao's smile against his bare skin. "You're right," she said, reluctantly pulling away from him, but not before giving him an extra squeeze and a murmured --

"Aishiteru."

Sano kissed her forehead. "Tell me what you need me to do, kirei, and I'll do it," he said, running his fingertips down her jawline.

"I'll make us some lunch... you go see to Himura," Misao said, heading for the kitchen.

.....

A thin wail jerked Sano out of his fitful sleep. He jumped off the porch and sprinted toward the room where Kaoru had been sequestered with the doctors since before lunchtime the previous day. The sky was beginning to blush with the first faint light of dawn. \_I've been asleep for a few hours, then -- but where are...\_

His grogginess disappeared as he caught sight of the small group huddled outside Kaoru's room. Sano's stomach twisted. "Oi, what happened?" he said gruffly, trying to mask his sudden fear.

The crowd broke apart, and Sano sighed with relief when he caught sight of the beaming faces of Tae, Tsubame, Yahiko, Yutarou and Ayame. He smiled in return, scratching the back of his head.

"So... it's done," he said.

Yahiko slapped Sano on the back. "Baka," he grinned. "It's been done. Kenshin just brought the babies out for us to see... a boy and a girl... they're kinda wrinkled and ugly like their busu mother --"

Tsubame swatted Yahiko's arm. "Yahiko-kun!" she admonished, making everyone laugh.

"Fine, fine... they're kinda cute, okay?" Yahiko grumbled, his cheeks reddening as he rubbed his arm sullenly.

"They already have hair," Tae marveled. "Red like their father's. It's hard to tell what color their eyes will be, but..."

"Damn, I miss everything," Sano said, sulking for a moment before asking --

"Where's Misao?"

"Kaoru-san asked to see her," Tsubame said as Yutarou teased Yahiko in the background. "She's been in there awhile..."

Just then the door slid open, emitting a procession that included Misao, Genzai, Megumi and Tatsuya. Kenshin stood at the door, thanking each doctor in turn. He clasped Megumi's hand with a grateful smile.

"I can't thank you enough, Megumi-dono, for taking such good care of Kaoru all these weeks. I'm truly in your debt."

Megumi smiled as she squeezed Kenshin's hand, then released it. "Seeing those babies safely into this world was enough payment," she said. "Arigatou, Ken-san, for allowing me the privilege."

Sano couldn't help grinning at the exchange, especially when he caught Tatsuya closely watching the two with a possessive gleam in his eye. \_That must be how I look whenever Shinomori's around,\_ he thought uneasily, turning his attention to Misao. He was stunned to see her wiping her eyes on her yukata sleeve.

"Doushita, Misao?" he asked, taking her gently by her shoulders.

She raised her tear-streaked face to his, and the glow he saw there nearly knocked the wind from him. "Nothing," she said softly. "It was just... they're so... beautiful. Perfect. And Kaoru-san... she wants to name the girl... Misako. For me."

Sano wrapped Misao in his arms, his love for her flooding his being with tender warmth. She snuggled close to him, murmured his name sleepily... then went limp in his arms. Alarmed, Sano looked up at Megumi, who wore a small smile.

"The poor girl hasn't slept all night," she explained. "You should probably put her to bed."

"Aa. Oyasumi," Sano said distractedly, gathering Misao in his arms and heading for her room as the others made their way toward the front gate, exchanging sly grins and knowing looks.

.....

Misao woke just before lunch, rolling over and stretching luxuriously. Kenshin had insisted she get as much sleep as she needed, and that she take her time getting up. "We'll all be fine, Misao-dono," he said, beaming as he held his tiny newborn son and daughter. "We have plenty of help coming in the morning... so don't worry about us..."

Misao grinned as she remembered Kenshin's proud expression... Kaoru's tired smile... the adoring way she looked at her babies. \_They have reason to be proud,\_ Misao thought, remembering the powerful emotions she'd felt as Kaoru had handed her newborn daughter to Misao, saying --

\_... Misao-chan... having you here all these months has been a blessing for our family... and has made you part of us forever. So I want to name her Misako... to honor that bond ...\_

Misao felt tears sting her eyes at the memory. After the disaster with Unmei and Toushi, she'd been depressed for awhile... focusing on what she'd lost in her life rather than what she had now. But the day she had been released from the clinic, Aoshi had walked her back to the doujou, and she was met at the gate by Sano, Kenshin and the children. Kaoru was there, too, despite her discomfort and the effort it had taken her just to walk outside. She smiled as she remembered the joy she'd felt, and vowed again -- as she had that day -- never to think of herself an orphan again.

She rose and dressed quickly, leaving her braid hanging down her back rather than pinning it up. As she headed for the kitchen, she caught sight of Aoshi talking with Kenshin in the front yard. Misao's eyes widened as she saw that Aoshi was holding Kintou. Keeping to the

shadows, she crept closer to observe them.

"He's about a year old now?" Aoshi asked as Kintou gurgled and tugged on Aoshi's shirt.

"Just about," Kenshin said. Misao couldn't see his face, but she could hear the touch of amusement in the swordsman's voice. "He took his first steps last week... soon he'll be giving Kaoru and me a lot more exercise. He seems to be curious about everything..."

"An explorer, are you?" Aoshi asked the baby solemnly. Kintou squealed and grabbed a handful of Aoshi's bangs, pulling hard.

"He has... quite a grip," the okashira said, wincing.

Misao doubled over, shaking violently as she struggled not to laugh aloud. Kenshin chuckled audibly, gently extricating Kintou's chubby hands.

"Sorry about that," Kenshin said as he took Kintou from Aoshi. "He's fascinated by hair..."

"Indeed he is," Misao said, stepping from the shadows, her eyes dancing merrily. "He's done that to me more times than I can count. Ohayou, Aoshi-sama."

"Ohayou," Aoshi replied in his calm way, though Misao could see the faint smile he wore. Kenshin bowed to them as he and Kintou took their leave.

Misao escorted Aoshi into the tiny sitting room where the Himuras received guests, then left to prepare the tea. It was a ritual that had become familiar over the past few weeks... one that she and Aoshi had often shared in Kyoto as well. It made her feel homesick for the Aoiya and her family there, though she wasn't quite ready to leave Tokyo yet.

\_Aoshi-sama seems different today,\_ Misao thought as they sat sipping their tea in silence. It wasn't just his uncharacteristic familiarity with Kenshin -- there was something important he needed to say to her. She could feel it in the air between them.

"Misao," Aoshi said finally, setting his cup down. "I am returning to Kyoto tomorrow."

\_So that's it.\_ Misao lowered her eyes, bracing herself for the next question.

"Will you be coming with me?" he asked.

Misao raised her eyes to Aoshi's, her voice steady as she answered --

"No."

Aoshi's face betrayed nothing. "I see," he said.

Misao's hands tightened around her knees. In all the weeks since Aoshi had regained consciousness, they had yet to address the issue of Sano. Several times, Misao had worked up the courage to initiate



such a conversation... only for her resolve to crumble in the face of her fear of upsetting the peace she'd finally achieved with her okashira.

\_Besides, what can I tell Aoshi-sama? It's not like Sano and I have any plans for the future...\_

A prickle of irritation accompanied Misao's thoughts on that matter. She and Sano hadn't been spending much time together since her release from the clinic. Between his new job and her duties at the doujou, she only saw him in the evenings... and then only for a few hours before he would head home, pleading exhaustion. And when they were together, he treated her with obvious affection... but also with the utmost restraint, stealing no more than a chaste kiss at the end of their evenings together. As much as Misao appreciated his efforts to be more respectable, she ached for the days when both of them were completely unguarded with each other... exploring each other's minds and bodies with unbridled relish.

\_Maybe I'm wrong... maybe his interest in me is cooling, and that's why he's acting this way.\_

Misao closed her eyes tightly against the growing fear she hadn't yet voiced. \_What if... Sano doesn't want me anymore? I love him so much... but if he doesn't love me... I just can't. I can't go through this again. Maybe I should go back to Kyoto...\_

"Is something wrong, Misao?"

Misao's eyes flew open at Aoshi's gently spoken question. "N- not at all," she said, forcing a smile. "I'm still tired from last night, I guess."

Aoshi studied Misao closely. He knew she was lying... and normally his nature would be to let her be until she was ready to talk to him. But he was running out of time -- there were matters in Kyoto that needed his attention. And he didn't want to leave Misao like this, with so much unsaid between them. He was done with watching and waiting for things to unfold.

"Misao... tell me why you're staying in Tokyo," he said.

Misao's breath caught. "Ano...I..." she stammered. "Eeto... Himura and Kaoru-san..."

"No," Aoshi said quietly. "The real reason."

Misao swallowed, her face flaming. "I'm... staying because of Sano," she admitted shakily. Giving herself a mental shake, she straightened her posture and continued in a stronger voice --

"I love Sano, Aoshi-sama. I'm staying to be with him."

Aoshi felt a curious, bittersweet mixture of relief and loss. "I suspected as much," he said.

Both fell silent. Aoshi contemplated a point on the wall just behind Misao, trying to find the right words to properly convey his hopes and fears for her. Misao finally lifted her gaze from the tatami underneath her and tried to meet Aoshi's eyes, which were obscured by

his thick bangs.

"Aoshi-sama... gomen nasai," she said tremulously.

Aoshi's eyes narrowed. "What do you have to be sorry for?" he said, a bit more sharply than he'd intended. Misao cringed. Cursing himself silently, he continued in a more mild tone --

"Misao... I won't pretend to be happy about your choice. Sagara is beneath you in many ways... a fact of which he is well aware."

"I know that," Misao snapped. "And I don't care. To hell with class and background and what people think... we love each other and we'll make our own way --" She paused as the second part of what Aoshi had said hit her. "What do you mean... he's aware?" she asked, her face darkening. "You've already spoken with him about this? Without talking to me first?"

"He came to see me while I was in the hospital," Aoshi said, inwardly preparing himself for Misao's impending tantrum. "He made his intentions toward you very clear... and I merely reminded him of his place and the obstacles he would need to overcome to win your consent."

"He made his intentions..." Misao repeated, her mind whirling with a mix of fury at Aoshi's meddling and astonished glee at the meaning behind it. \_Sano intends to marry me! That's why the job... the sudden distance... he's trying to prove he's a worthy suitor... and that he'll be a good husband to me...\_

\_A worthy suitor...\_

"Aoshi no baka!" she cried suddenly, springing to her feet so quickly she knocked her teacup over. Her face was crimson with rage. "So this is your doing! You made Sano feel like a loser... like he doesn't deserve me. Like I'm some kind of princess or something that he has to treat with deference and work like a dog to support! Who the hell do you think you are, to treat him that way?"

Aoshi watched, outwardly unmoved by Misao's rage, though his brain was working furiously to come up with a defense for his actions. Misao advanced a step, resting her fisted hands on her hips and tossing her head defiantly.

"You may be my okashira," she hissed. "But you're not my father. You have no say in whom I choose to marry."

"Perhaps not," Aoshi said placidly. "But Okina is your guardian... and he heeds my council above all others when it comes to matters concerning you." A note of steely command entered his voice. "Now sit down. I'm not done speaking with you."

"Go to hell," Misao spat, spinning on her heel and storming toward the door. With cat-like speed and grace, Aoshi rose, grabbing her arm as he blocked her path.

"Please," he added.

Misao glared at Aoshi. She could see the plea in his eyes, even as he tightened his grip on her arm. \_Damn him... he's the most

frustrating, infuriating, confusing man I've ever known... why I love him, I'll never guess...\_

She slowly returned to her place, picking up her cup and setting it back on the tray before kneeling before Aoshi again. The onmitsu struggled not to show his amusement as he observed Misao's sulky, defiant countenance... a look he'd seen her wear a thousand times in the time they'd known each other.

"Misao, I have only your best interests at heart," Aoshi said gently. "You must know that."

Misao raised an eyebrow at him. "Do you?" she inquired.

"Of course," he said. "You are my family, after all... I love you as I would my own flesh and blood."

Misao gaped at Aoshi as her mind registered his words. "You... love me?" she squeaked.

Aoshi's eyes glimmered. "I've always loved you, little one," he murmured. "Since the day you were born. Surely you know that as well."

Misao's throat was so clotted with emotion that she could hardly speak. "But... you never said..." she choked. "I mean..."

"It is... hard... for me," Aoshi said slowly. "I was raised to believe such feelings were weakness... something that should be tucked deep inside and never spoken of." He trembled slightly as he continued --

"And my silence was partly because I was so afraid to hurt you. I knew how you felt about me... and I didn't want to encourage what I thought was a youthful crush. And later... when I realized... I didn't want to break your heart." His tone turned regretful. "But I did anyway..."

"Oh, Aoshi-sama," Misao whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks. Aoshi opened his arms and Misao hurled herself into his embrace, emptying her heart of its last vestiges of grief over her lost love. Aoshi lay his cheek on top of her head, murmuring --

"Misao... forgive me... for not loving you the way you wanted. And for leading you to believe I felt nothing for you at all. That was a lie..."

"I'm the one who should be sorry," Misao said, her voice muffled against Aoshi's shirt. "Whatever you feel for me is enough. It should have been then... and it is now..."

She gulped back another sob, adding in a small voice --

"I love you, Aoshi-sama..."

Aoshi kissed the top of her head, smiling into her hair. After a few more moments, Misao self-consciously drew away from him, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

"I should be going," Aoshi said, rising and extending a hand to

Misao. "Are you sure you don't want to return with me?"

Misao nodded. "I'm still needed here," she said as Aoshi helped her to her feet. "Tell Jiya not to worry... I'll be home before the first snowfall."

Aoshi studied Misao, his lips twitching briefly. "Is there anything else I should tell Okina?" he asked.

Misao blushed. "Not yet," she said. "I'll be in touch."

.....

Sano trudged toward the public bathhouse, feeling the full weight of his fatigue for the first time that day. He'd only slept a couple of hours before Genji woke him for work, but Sano had cheerfully refused his friend's offer of another day off to recover from the vigil he'd kept the night before. Genji had gone out of his way to convince his father to hire Sano, and Sano wasn't about to take further advantage of Genji's generosity.

\_Too bad he woke me up when he did, though,\_ Sano thought with a lascivious grin. He'd been having another delicious dream about Misao... standing naked under a waterfall... her hair loose and flowing around her body, mingling with the pounding water. She'd caught him spying on her and smiled, holding out a slender, dripping hand...

\_Chikusho! Shouldn't think about that before a bath... it could get embarrassing...\_

Sano managed to calm himself by the time he reached the bathhouse. He whistled cheerfully as he scrubbed the day's sweat from his skin, eagerly anticipating the meal Misao would have waiting for him when he reached the doujou. He dressed carefully in the new clothes he'd bought the week before -- a chestnut gi patterned with faint gray lines and white hakama bordered with black. He normally went for flashier colors, but the seller talked Sano into the more sedate gi, saying its color deepened the brown of Sano's eyes. "Your lady will be very impressed," the proprietor said, elbowing him playfully.

Sano continued to whistle as he headed for the doujou, but his thoughts took a more serious turn. During the weeks since Misao's recovery, he'd made good on his promise to show Misao he was capable of being industrious and well-mannered. He hadn't missed a day of work... he had cut back his evening activities to once a week or so... and he hadn't done more than kiss Misao at the end of their dates, despite his ever-present, aching desire for her. His self-restraint had resulted in a not-wholly unpleasant side effect -- he dreamed of Misao almost every night, acting out in imagination what he denied himself in reality. Though he often woke up frustrated... and sometimes sheepish in his body's inadvertant release... he figured it was better than the alternative.

\_I can do this... it won't be much longer. I'll have enough set aside by the summer to ask for her hand...\_

But the months until then stretched before Sano like a colorless

landscape... an endless succession of hard work, friendly dinners, careful conversation and restrained kisses while he constantly battled his libido. He grew even more tired just thinking about it.

Then he thought of Misao, whose cheerful manner and ardent attention had appeared to flag somewhat over the past week. At first, he'd worried that her thoughts were turning back to Shinomori Aoshi, especially since she'd been spending an hour or so with him every morning drinking tea -- or so she said. But when he'd angrily asked her a few nights ago whether that grumpy old bastard was looking for something sweeter than tea from her, she'd laughed at him.

"Don't be jealous," she'd said, tweaking his nose playfully. "You know you're the only one for me, tori-chan."

She'd kissed him then in a way that left little doubt as to the truth of her statement. It had been the closest he'd come to breaking his pact with himself, so fierce was his hunger for her. So he deliberately lost his footing on the riverbank and fell in head-first, the chilly autumn waters effectively dousing his burning lust. And Misao had laughed so hard that he'd dragged her in after him to get even with her. He chuckled to himself, remembering the way they'd wrestled and spashed each other, shrieking like children. It had been the most fun they'd had together in weeks.

But after that, Sano had renewed his vow to keep things chaste between them. He thought she would appreciate his effort to be a gentleman... but sometimes he caught her looking at him wistfully after he kissed her good-night... like she was expecting something different.

\_Something more...\_

He shook his head briskly. \_Nah... that's wishful thinking. She hasn't said anything... and I know Misao. She would tell me if I wasn't pleasing her...\_

He hopped over the back gate and strode toward the kitchen to see if he could help Misao with the cooking. He waved at Kenshin, who was taking down the last of the laundry.

"Ah, Sano," Kenshin said, smiling broadly. "Misao-dono is expecting you. She's..."

"...in the kitchen," Sano finished with a smile. "Thanks, Kenshin."

He made his way there, lingering in the doorway for a moment to admire the way the late afternoon sun outlined Misao's slender, kimono-clad form as she chopped a daikon. She set the knife down and stretched, arching her back and pushing her breasts into prominent view. \_She's not as... well-endowed... as the fox-lady, but there's plenty enough there to please me,\_ Sano thought with an appreciative leer. He remembered how he had touched Misao's bare, wet breasts in his dream the night before... how they had felt and smelled and tasted as he'd knelt before her and --

\_Gods... get a hold of yourself, baka-yarou!\_

Sano swallowed heavily -- and realized that during his reverie, Misao had turned around... and was now eyeing him greedily, as if he were the next item on her menu. Her eyes met his... her gaze a hot blaze of blue that made Sano think of a bonfire at its peak. Her luscious full lips parted, her tongue flickering out to moisten them. Sano felt his own lips curl back from his teeth in anticipation.

They remained that way for one heady instant, reveling in the awesome sensuality that pulsed in the air around them. Then, as one, they crossed the room and met in its center, joining in a frenzy of devouring mouths and groping hands. Sano dimly remembered the open doorway... pulling Misao along with him, he backstepped toward the shoji, then reached behind him and roughly yanked it shut, his mouth never leaving hers.

Misao pushed Sano against the closed door as she delved into his mouth with renewed vigor. Desire, thick and warm as fresh honey, spread from her loins to her toes, then back up to the roots of her hair. \_Oh, Sano... how I've missed this...\_ She moaned as Sano ran his hands over her clothed breasts, cupping and squeezing them gently... then repeated the action with her buttocks. She pressed closer to him, wanting more of him, needing it like she'd never needed anything else in her life.

"Sano no baka," she growled as he kissed her neck.

"Mm?" It didn't even occur to Sano to protest as he nibbled the soft, fragrant skin at the base of her throat.

"Letting... Aoshi-sama... get to you... like that," Misao scolded breathlessly as Sano's hands wandered over her back. "Denying me... us... this..."

"I know," Sano agreed, his tone gruffly apologetic. "But Misao... I want to be a better --"

"There's no one better than you," Misao interjected in a tone that brooked no argument. "You don't need to change for me... I love you as you are."

She kissed him before he could reply. After several minutes more, as Sano was fumbling with Misao's obi, they both heard Kenshin calling them --

"Misao-dono? Sano?"

Reluctantly, the couple separated... Misao cursing so colorfully that Sano burst out laughing.

"Shit... I'm probably a mess," Misao muttered, finger-combing her bangs while Sano straightened her obi, tickling her ribs playfully.

"Not really," Sano said, grinning as Misao slapped his hands away. "You look well-kissed, is all... and Kenshin's a discreet kind of guy. He won't mention it if you don't."

"But what about dinner?" Misao wailed.

Sano winked. "There's always the Akabeko," he said. "We can bring

back takeout for everyone. Less work for you... and less clean-up afterward." He eyed her meaningfully.

Misao responded with a slow, sensual smile. "There is that," she said, her body continuing to throb with arousal as she realized what Sano was intimating. \_Yes, Sano... it's time. Past time...\_

"Shall we go?" he asked, holding out a hand to her. Misao took it as Sano slid the door open, and they stepped into the waning sunlight together.

-- End of Chapter 22 --

### 23. These Changing Times (NC-17 warning!)

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^\_^;;

**\*\*Note:\*\*** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

**\*\*WARNING!\*\*** This chapter is rated NC-17 for graphic sexual content. If you are under 17, or are offended by this sort of thing, please skip to the next chapter. Arigatou!

**\*\***

Chapter 23 -- Tonight

**\*\***

Sano roamed the confines of his small room restlessly, picking up books and flipping through them mindlessly before tossing them aside... then picking them up again and shoving them back onto the small bookshelf he'd built. \_Should keep the place clean at least before she...\_

He swallowed nervously. \_What if she doesn't come? What if she changed her mind? What if Shinomori finds out and stops her?\_

He closed his eyes, mentally shaking himself --

Baka-yarou... she loves you... wants you... what will it take to make you believe it?

—

A sharp rap sounded on the door. Heart pounding, palms sweating, Sano quickly rose and slid the door open.

Misao stood before him, clad in a long sky-blue manto with the hood raised against the chilly evening breeze. He could just make out the darker blue of her Oniwabanshuu uniform peeking from beneath the cloak. Her warm blue-green eyes met his relieved brown gaze.

"You came," he said simply, inclining his head slightly as he stepped aside.

She smiled as she entered the room at his wordless invitation. "I came," she repeated, her voice low as she surveyed the spartan space, her eyes lingering on the futon spread out in the corner.

Sano wiped his palms hastily on the back of his pants, then held out a hand to Misao. "Can I take your cloak?" he said.

She turned to face him fully, a slight flush spreading over her cheeks as she noticed he was wearing pants, his headband... and nothing else, not even his omnipresent bandages. She glimpsed his distinctive white jacket with its stylized "aku" marking hanging from a peg in the wall just opposite them. Her eyes traveled over Sano's broad shoulders... his bare chest... his taut, unbandaged stomach... his white pants, which were loosened and hanging a bit lower than usual... his muscled calves and bare feet.

The sight of him made her weak in the knees.

"Misao?" Sano prompted, feeling his body stir as she studied him.

Misao managed to tear her eyes away from his state of undress. She'd been nervous when she'd entered Sano's room, but her jitters had since disappeared, replaced by calm certainty. She met his questioning eyes silently for a moment, savoring the intense attraction simmering between them. Without answering, she slowly undid the clasp of her cloak, slipping it off her shoulders and handing it to him. His fingertips brushed hers as he took it, and she almost gasped aloud at the sensations the simple touch invoked.

Sano hung the cloak on an empty wall peg next to his jacket. As he faced her again, it was his turn to admire her. Misao felt momentarily shy as his eyes roved over her. She had deliberately left her breasts unbound and worn her ninja gear with the top arranged in such a way that it revealed a tantalizing glimpse of her bare cleavage... and she also had foregone her usual leg bandages, wearing only tabi and straw sandals. It felt a bit strange -- not to mention chilly -- but it had the advantage of showing off her slender, shapely legs from ankle to mid-thigh.

—

\_Damn...\_ Sano thought. \_She looks incredible.\_ He pictured himself



burying his face in that revealing neckline... running his hands over those beautiful legs... carrying her to his futon and --

He cleared his throat. "So... will it be tonight, Misao?" he asked her in an almost-steady voice.

Misao took a deep breath and, looking him straight in the eyes, said softly --

"Hai. Tonight."

Misao stepped forward until she was standing directly in front of Sano. She gazed up at him, drinking in the sight of him, smiling inwardly at his faintly surprised, expectant expression. His impatience was almost tangible, but he remained motionless before her, waiting to see what she would do.

—

\_Waiting for me to do whatever... I... want...\_ The thought made her almost giddy.

She slowly reached out and ran her fingertips up his bare torso, from his stomach to his chest, her smile widening as she felt his muscles jump and heard his breath catch.\_ Wonder what it would be like to kiss him... there...\_

--

As soon as she had the thought, she acted on it, leaning forward and brushing tentative kisses across his chest. He groaned softly, dropping his head back as her mouth traveled up his chest, her kisses becoming bolder as she stood on tiptoe to reach his neck.

When she began nibbling the skin just below his ear, Sano could hold back no longer. Breathing her name, he pulled her flush against him and tipped her face up to his, capturing those sweet, tormenting lips with his own. She shifted against him as they kissed, pressing her bosom against his chest, answering his throaty growl with her own arduous murmur. Minutes passed, punctuated only by the soft sounds of their mouths meeting... the rustle of clothing and bodies brushing together... an occasional brief, pleased moan.

Unfortunately, after a time, the arousal pulsing through Misao's body began to be dampened by the growing pain in her neck as she awkwardly strained upward to match Sano's kisses.

"Wait," she panted, breaking away. "You're... too tall... my neck hurts..."

Sano chuckled, gently rubbing the back of her neck. "Better rest it, then" he said, his deep, seductive voice sending tremors through Misao's belly. "Let's try something else for awhile." He gave her cheek a lingering caress as he dropped to his knees, tugging her down with him. "Turn around, pretty lady," he murmured in the midst of another kiss. "There's something I've always wanted to do..."

Misao's mind swam with the possibilities. \_He's... he's probably going to... oh, yes... I want him to do that...\_

She obediently turned away from him, shifting nervously on her knees as she waited for Sano to loosen her sash. Instead, he stroked the back of her neck, running his fingers over the baby-fine hairs at her nape. He tenderly kissed her there once, twice... then withdrew, leaving her bewildered and flustered.

"Sa~nooo," she wailed in frustration. "What are you trying to do to me?"

"Patience, itachi-chan," he said, laughter rippling through his voice. "I'll make it worth your while... I promise."

"You'd better, tori-chan," she replied, making them both laugh. He leaned over and whispered in her ear --

"I'll be your rooster... whenever you want, babe." She snickered, then gasped as he flicked his tongue inside her ear, awed by the sharp, sweet feelings coursing through her breasts... her belly... lower...

"Ohhh," she moaned as he pulled her back against him, slipping one arm around her waist and pressing wild, open-mouthed kisses against the side of her neck. "Oh, Sano... don't stop..."

"Give me... one minute," he murmured between kisses. "There's still something..." He left off kissing her neck, and Misao felt a gentle tug on her braid. She then heard a metallic clink as Sano put aside the bronze ornament she wore at its end. She giggled as he fumbled with the twine she'd tied the end of her braid with.

"Dammit, Misao, how many knots did you put in this thing anyway?" he grouched, making her giggle harder.

"Don't worry," she said, wriggling provocatively against him. "That's the only thing I'm wearing that's hard to untie."

Muttering a few frustrated curses, Sano raised the end of Misao's braid to his teeth and gnawed through the twine. He then carefully undid her thick braid, combing it out with his fingers. She shook her head reflexively when he was done, fanning the loose strands across her back... then turned slowly to face him. The hunger in his eyes softened slightly as he admired the sight of her with her silky black hair tumbling down her back and shoulders, framing her delicate face and intensifying the color of her eyes.

"Kirei..." he whispered. "As beautiful as in my dreams..."

Misao's eyes widened in surprise. "You've dreamed about me?" she whispered back.

"Aa." His eyes burned with remembered desire. "Many times I awoke from those dreams... wanting you here with me... like this..." He pulled her to him again, running his hands through her hair as they kissed long and deep. He drew back slightly, his fierce gaze making her heart flutter. "Misao," he said urgently. "I want to take you to bed... touch you... love you... but only if you're sure --"

He fell silent as she traced his lips with her fingers. "I'm sure," she whispered, shivering as he sucked and nibbled at their tips.

"Sano... I love you... I want to be with you. I don't want to wait anymore."

Sano couldn't help grinning at that. \_A typical Misao answer... bold and to the point. We're so alike sometimes it's scary. \_ His eyes darkened with determined purpose. \_ Time we found out just how right we are together...\_

"Then, if you're sure... turn around one more time, kirei," he said. She obliged him, her nerves quivering as she felt him tug on the bow nestled against her spine. The sash came undone easily, and she smiled as Sano pulled it away from her body and tossed it across the room. She turned toward him again, her sleeveless top parting just enough to expose a thin strip of creamy flesh running from the hollow of her throat to just below her navel. Sano maneuvered himself so that he could slip an arm underneath her knees and another under her back... then lifted her off the floor and carried her to his futon.

Misao trembled as Sano carefully lay her onto his bed. She was still floored by Sano's admission... especially since she'd been dreaming of him lately, too. \_Wouldn't it be odd if our dreams have been the same?\_ She blushed as she remembered the most recent dream... and how its lingering effect had prompted her attack in the kitchen earlier that night. Sano bent over her and stroked her reddened cheek with the back of one hand.

"Tell me what you're thinking, Misao," he said, cupping her cheek, his smoldering eyes locked on hers.

She swallowed. "I've... been dreaming of you, too... Sano," she whispered ardently, taking his hand from her face and kissing it.

His eyes burned brighter. "Tell me," he whispered hoarsely, lowering himself onto her. "What did I do in your dreams?"

She felt a forbidden thrill dance up her spine. "You kissed me... here," she said in a low voice, touching the hollow of her throat. Sano immediately pressed his lips there, dipping his tongue into the depression. He lifted his face slightly, watching her as she sighed with pleasure.

"What else did I do?" he asked huskily, fighting the ever-growing urge to rip away her half-open top and ravish her. \_Slowly, baka-yarou... it's her first time... and we have all night...\_

--

Misao toyed with the strands of hair framing Sano's face, the blue in her eyes deepening as she remembered. "You kissed me... here," she murmured, running a finger slowly down the bare skin from the base of her throat to between her breasts, which were now only partially covered by the fabric of her top. Sano felt his heart speed up as he lowered his lips to her pale skin, following the trail she'd marked with her finger, smiling slightly at her welcoming murmur. He looked up again at the path's end, his face hovering just above her breasts.

"Then what, my beauty?" he whispered, his breath tickling her skin.

\_Please... oh, please, let me...\_

--

Misao blushed again as she pictured the scene from her dream. Just thinking about what he had done... and how much she'd liked it... made her feel a little embarrassed. \_I don't know if I can say it... demo... I really want him to...\_

--

With her heart beating in her ears, Misao slowly parted her top.

Sano gazed for a moment at her naked breasts... watching as their rosy nipples hardened under his scrutiny. He needed no further invitation. "Kirei..." he breathed as he covered one breast with soft, sensual kisses.

Misao moaned as his mouth touched her breast for the first time... then squealed as he took in her nipple, suckling it tenderly, teasing it with tongue and teeth until she thought she might go mad. \_Gods, the sensations... ! Better than any dream.\_ They rocked her body and blotted out all conscious thought except one.

—

\_Yes...\_

She mewled his name... sank her hands in his hair... writhed underneath him as his mouth engulfed her other breast, his hand continuing to stroke the one he'd kissed first. She felt the pull she'd experienced with Sano many times before, only more intense... the feelings becoming concentrated in that secret spot between her legs... building there... making her feel restless, wanting something more...

After so many nights of dreaming of Misao, Sano reveled in the reality of her presence... the exquisite softness of her flesh under his hands and lips... the sharp snap of lust as she arched her body against his... the luxurious feel of her fingers threading through his hair, cradling his head against her bosom... the tremors in his stomach as she moaned his name, begged him for more.

He lifted his head and met her eyes again, noting with satisfaction her wild, abandoned expression. "Tell me what else I did, kirei," he purred, brushing his thumbs over her taut peaks.

Panting slightly, she pulled him down to her and kissed him thoroughly, running her hands over his bare back, enjoying the weight of his long, hard body pushing against hers... the silky warmth of their bare flesh pressing together.

"It isn't what you did... it's what I did..." she said with a sly smile as she reached up behind his head, tugging on the knot of his headband. She then rolled Sano onto his back and sat up, straddling him. She draped his headband around her neck, fingering the loose ends. Sano watched her hungrily, his vision partially obscured by the thick fringe that had fallen over his forehead when Misao had removed the strip of fabric.

"Know what I think every time I see you wearing this?" she said impishly.

Sano smiled, resting his hands easily against her waist. "Nani?"

She trailed her fingers across the fabric. "When I first gave this to you, you ran your fingers over it... like this..." she murmured. "And I remember wanting to be that headband.... with your hands stroking me that way."

Sano ran his hands lightly up her bare ribs. "Like this?" he murmured as she shivered.

"Oh, yes..." she sighed.

"And this?" he said as his hands continued their journey up her back and over her shoulders. She hummed her assent, smiling as he slowly pushed her shirt off her shoulders and down her arms, which she obediently dropped straight at her sides so he could more easily remove the garment. With a teasing grin, she maneuvered Sano's headband so that it covered the tips of her breasts, shivering as the smooth silk brushed the hardened, sensitive flesh there.

Sano found the action both sexy and endearing. A wicked smile slowly spread across his face as an idea took form. "And this?" he said in a low, seductive voice, running the backs of his fingers down the red silk, pressing it against Misao's hardened nipples as he did so. She moaned and wriggled against his own swollen, aroused flesh, prompting an answering moan from Sano as his body throbbed in response.

"And this?" he whispered urgently, caressing her thighs, letting his fingers wander just inside the cuffs of her short pants, then back down to her knees.

"Yes, Sano..." she breathed, rocking slowly against him. "Like that... touch me everywhere."

"Aa," he growled, sitting up suddenly. The glint in his eyes was almost feral, and Misao felt a tiny prick of fear as he rose to his feet, roughly pulling her up with him, kissing her so hard their teeth clicked together. Sano felt her stiffen and quickly drew back.

"Sumanu, Misao," he whispered, gently kissing her forehead, her cheeks. "I got carried away. Did I hurt you?"

She relaxed immediately. "Iie," she said, smiling up at him. "It's all right... you're just impatient, ne?" She ran her hands slowly down his bare torso, then brushed her fingers over the knot at his waist. "I know I am," she murmured, eyes simmering as she tugged at the knot. "I'm so impatient... Sano, I want to see you... touch you... onegai..."

"I know... I want you to," he said, catching her hand in both of his and pressing it to his lips. "Shikashi... I need you to know something first." His eyes seemed to melt into hers as he said --

"You know I love you, Misao... but I haven't told you yet that I want

to make you my wife. I have to be sure that's what you want, too... before we --"

Misao threw her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly, nearly knocking the breath from him. "Baka," she whispered fiercely as Sano felt the telltale tickle of her tears dampen his chest. "Of course I want to marry you. I love you, remember?"

"Misao..." he whispered, his entire body singing. "I'll love you always... it's a promise..."

They sank to their knees, kissing deeply, their joyful tears mingling. It wasn't long before their tears dried and their hands began roaming, firing their passion again. Misao broke away from Sano, breathing heavily, her eyes intense.

"Sano... make me yours," she said, punctuating her pleading command by running her fingers lightly over the bulge in his pants.

"Aa," he growled, taking his hands from her breasts and fumbling with the knot at his waist. When it came undone, Misao helped him slide his pants down, revealing his lean hips... his beautifully muscled thighs... and...

Misao stared at his erection, fascinated and a trifle dismayed. "That's supposed to fit inside me?" she asked. "How is that possible?"

Sano's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter as he tugged at the drawstring holding Misao's short pants up. "I'll take that as a compliment," he murmured, kissing her neck as he slid her shorts down her hips. "Don't worry, love... I won't try that until you're ready."

"Datte... how will I know?" she said, a little anxiously.

"You will. And I'll help you," he said reassuringly, laying her back on the futon so he could remove her shorts completely... then her tabi... then standing to finish removing his own pants. He gazed down at her, awed by her pale, perfect beauty... the dark hair pooled around her shoulders matching the dark nest between her thighs. Her skin was soft, but her body was not -- it was honed and conditioned by years of training. Yet the training only emphasized her feminine curves, making her all the more desirable.

"So lovely," he whispered reverently, kneeling over her. He brushed a finger over her lips, which parted, her tongue flickering over the digit. Still, there was fear in her eyes... not of him, he knew... but of the unknown.

"Misao... do you trust me?" he asked, stroking the side of one breast.

"Of course," she responded, keeping her eyes on his with an effort. Her fingers itched to touch him... there... but she was having trouble overcoming the shyness that had gripped her when he removed the last of her clothing. \_I know so little about loving... only the things Omasu and Okon told me... and the conversations I overheard between them. Sano's had actual experience... what if I displease him somehow... make him regret his feelings?\_

--  
Sano kissed her softly, then whispered ardently in her ear --

"Go ahead, Misao. It's all right... you won't hurt me. Quite the opposite, believe me."

Encouraged by his words, his yearning brown eyes, Misao reached up and brushed his member with the lightest of caresses. Her eyes widened with wonder. "Ohh... it's firm... but so smooth... like the finest silk," she whispered, her touch becoming bolder... her fingers more curious.

Sano groaned as sharp, delicious sensations washed through him. "Don't..." he pleaded as she withdrew her hand, looking concerned. He grabbed it, replacing it between his legs. "Misao... don't stop. It's... so good..."

She smiled, delighted that she could drive him as wild as he did her. "I won't stop," she breathed, stroking him with renewed purpose, feeling his body pulse in her hand, matching the pulsing between her own thighs. Sano's moans and pleas for more ripped away the last of her restraint. Thought gave way to instinct as she sat up and pushed Sano back against the bedding. She lowered her head and...

"Ohh... Misao... kami-sama..." Sano's hands buried themselves in her hair, pushing her head against him, his body quivering in unimaginable ecstasy. "Ore... ore... ahh..."

As she took him in her mouth, Misao heard her more proper self scream that what she was doing was filthy... that it made her no better than a whore. But she didn't care. She felt something dark and elemental stirring inside her... that part of her that came alive whenever she and Sano were together like this. That unabashedly sensual part of her wanted nothing more than to give pleasure and receive it in kind... and didn't care how or why or whether it was proper.

She discovered something else -- giving him pleasure this way fanned her own flame, making her want him even more ferociously. Her mouth left his penis, traveling hungrily up his stomach, his chest. "Sano... gomen... I couldn't wait anymore..." she murmured as her wandering lips met his once more. "I want you so badly... onegai..."

Sano's face was sweating, and he silently thanked whatever deities there were that Misao had stopped what she was doing when she did. \_Gods, I'm so close... and she's not ready. Yet. \_He smiled, relishing the thought of exploring her sweet body... of pleasuring her as she had him.

"Let me touch you first, kirei," he said, carefully rolling her onto her back. He ran his fingers slowly up the insides of her legs, from her slender ankles to her knees, then to her thighs, stroking them as she moaned softly, opening them wider to his touch. He lightly traced the edges of the hair marking their apex, smiling as he heard her breath catch... then cupped her firmly against his palm. She groaned, leaning into his touch, murmuring wordless pleas as he ground the heel of his hand against her, coaxing her higher. The feel of her warm wetness against his palm sent a shaft of heat through him,

touching off an undeniable urge to kiss her there. \_Touch first... then taste,\_ he thought, smiling inwardly as he remembered her doing the same to him.

He carefully slipped his fingers inside the outer folds of skin covering her pleasure center, stroking the moist, sensitive flesh within, searching for that hidden spot that would make her howl with ecstasy.

"Sanooooo... ohhhh," Misao moaned, covering his questing hand with her own, her head thrashing against the bedding. "More... want you... fill me..."

A brief, sly smile crossed his face at her breathless, unabashed demand. "All in good time, my beauty," he murmured, brushing her open mouth with his as his fingertips found the place he'd been seeking...

Misao jerked as Sano's fingers suddenly tightened against her. "Aah!" she cried out, overwhelmed by the white-hot pleasure his touch ignited within her. His previous touches had bathed her in warm, yearning sensations... this new feeling was almost frightening in its intensity. She mewled pleadingly, reflexively grabbing Sano's wrist as she tried to pull away from his hand. He gently nudged her hand aside, whispering --

"Shh... don't be afraid." He breathed against the base of her neck, kissing it as he slowed the pace of his caress. "You're safe, love. Let yourself go..."

His fingers tightened again, sending another bolt of incredible sensation through her. "Sano," she gasped, her body tensing against the pull. "Too much... losing myself..."

"I'm here, kirei," Sano murmured as he sprinkled feather-light kisses over her belly. "I'll help you find your way back... come, sweet Misao... fly with me..."

Misao closed her eyes, feeling momentarily ashamed. \_Of course... Sano loves me... he'll keep me safe...\_ She willed her muscles to relax... and was immediately swept into the river of pleasure surging within her. Sano raised his face long enough to register her assent, smiling as her passion-clouded eyes met his. Wordlessly, she threw her arms over her head, her hands grasping the bedding, her body arching upward.

Sano chuckled wickedly at the wanton picture she made... then dipped his head between her legs and tasted her. \_So sweet... like spring rain,\_ he thought, his tongue stroking inside her while his fingertips continued to dance nimbly over her pleasure zone.

Misao dimly wondered if it was possible for someone to die from ecstasy. Panting hard, she spread her legs wider, rocking her body in time with the rhythmic strokes of his tongue. She cradled her aching breasts, squeezing them to release the pent-up sensations... squealing as Sano took full possession of her with his mouth, sucking her, his teeth lightly scraping her sensitive flesh, somehow causing more pleasure than pain. She opened her mouth to tell him, beg him for more, but the only sounds that emerged were several sharp, gasping cries.



Sano let loose a muffled groan as Misao thrust against him. Her taste... her scent... the impassioned noises she made... it stoked his desire for her like nothing he'd ever experienced. \_I can't... I have to have her... now...\_

--

As if she'd heard his thoughts, Misao screamed Sano's name, her body shuddering with release. \_Now.\_ Sano pulled himself up over her and entered her in one mighty thrust, uttering a primal growl as he felt her barrier yield to him. \_My woman... mine always...\_

--

Misao was so focused on the magnificent explosion spiraling through her body that she barely felt Sano's entrance. She was vaguely aware of a tearing sensation... of a tightness between her legs... of Sano's body pressed close to hers again. He kissed her open mouth, murmuring her name, calling her back from the light and the endless blue sky where she'd soared so briefly.

"Sano," she sighed, running her fingers through his hair as they kissed. "You were right... you were so right..."

"I told you I'd be here, kirei," he said, his voice strained. "Demo... come back... I need you now..."

Misao shifted against him, surprised by how much her flesh had stretched to accomodate him, though it still felt tight. He cried out, his face contorting with pleasure, and returned the motion, setting himself deep inside her. She drew her breath in sharply, unable to keep from wincing at the discomfort.

"Misao... I don't want to hurt you..." he panted, raising himself up on his elbows to get a better look at her face.

"I know," she said, touching his mouth, her eyes tender. "It's okay, though... I want you to fly like I did, Sano... show me what to do..."

Sano whispered her name gratefully, kissed her softly. "Just what you're doing," he said. "But promise you'll stop me if it hurts too much..."

"I promise," she said, pushing up against him experimentally. Despite the discomfort she felt, she loved the feel of him inside her... the sensation of them joined together as one. \_The soreness will pass... Okon told me so... and it's a small price to pay to give Sano what he gave me...\_

--

Sano moaned, wrapping his arms around Misao as he pulled out slowly, then pushed back in. He didn't want to hurt her... but it was so good... so warm inside her... and the feel of her moist flesh sliding against his was just too sweet to be denied. His thrusts grew more rapid, more rhythmic as he climbed toward that same peak he'd helped Misao find earlier. He was half-aware of Misao's whispered encouragements... of her wrapping her legs around his waist, giving

herself over to him. Her complete surrender did him in... and he felt himself tumble off the edge into glorious oblivion.

Misao smiled joyfully at Sano's husky cry of release, tightening her grip on him as he trembled against and within her. He pressed his face in the crook between her neck and shoulder, his rapid breathing warm against her skin. They rested that way for a few minutes in silence, still joined together, basking in the languid warmth of afterglow.

Misao was the first to speak. "Yokatta ne?" she asked, idly stroking Sano's back, smiling as he chuckled against her.

Sano kissed her collarbone tenderly. "Aa," he replied in that deep, sexy voice she'd come to love. "Totemo yokatta."

She giggled as she dropped her legs onto the bed again, allowing Sano to pull out of her. He rolled over on his side, facing Misao, smiling as she mirrored him. She grinned back at him as his eyes traveled over her once more... admiring her sparkling eyes... her slightly flushed face... the way the dark silk of her hair twined wildly around her naked body, partially obscuring her feminine attributes.

"Mmm... you should always dress like that," he said appreciatively, eliciting a bubbly laugh from the woman at his side.

"Only for you," she murmured, moving in for a lingering kiss.

"I like that idea," he replied, pulling the covers over them both, then wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close. "Misao... I've never been so happy," he whispered.

She felt her heart swell again. "I know," she replied softly, kissing his chest. "I didn't think such happiness was possible."

Sano stroked her soft hair, marveling at the perfect fit of their bodies. He felt sleep begin to claim him, and murmured --

"Misao... aishiteru... stay with me..."

Misao snuggled closer to him, knowing what he meant without him having to finish.

"Don't worry... I'm not going anywhere," she whispered sleepily before drifting off into beautiful, sun-filled dreams.

-- End of Chapter 23 --

24. These Changing Times Ch. 23a (NC-17 warn...

**\*\*These Changing Times\*\***

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^\_^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up

in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

**\*\*Note:\*\*** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

**\*\*WARNING!\*\*** This chapter is rated NC-17 for graphic sexual content. If you are under 17, or are offended by this sort of thing, please skip to the next chapter. Arigatou!

### **\*\*Chapter 23.5 -- Morning Breaks\*\***

Sano stirred at the sound of someone tossing wash-water into the street. His eyes opened halfway as he tried to orient himself in the faint early morning light... and widened fully as they fell upon the most precious thing he'd ever seen.

Misao was curled against his side, sleeping deeply, her mouth slightly open. A tendril of her tousled hair rested against her lips, fluttering with each breath she took. One hand rested against his chest, while the other was nestled between her bare breasts, clutching a slender piece of red fabric.

\_My headband...\_

He found the sight profoundly moving... not to mention arousing, considering the position of the cloth. Sano smiled in satisfaction as he remembered his lips tracing the same path now marked by the crimson bandana. More memories of the night's events floated through his consciousness, widening his smile and sending prickles of desire through his body. Being with Misao had been more splendid than he could ever have dreamed... their love heightening the pleasure of the primal sex act in ways he'd never experienced before. They had joined in spirit as well as body... and the aftermath brought him a sense of completion and peace he'd never thought it possible for a restless heart like his to feel.

Misao shifted in her sleep, smiling as she rolled over onto her back, throwing her arms wide open and fully exposing her upper body, the covers pooling just above her hips. Sano grinned wickedly.

\_How can I resist such an open invitation?\_

He carefully bent over her and blew in her ear. Misao sighed, turning her head away from him. Sano kissed her shoulder, nipping it lightly with his teeth, then nibbled a path across her collarbone to the soft hollow at the base of her throat. She murmured wordlessly as he kissed her there, then nipped her gently again. He smiled as she tried to roll away from him, her murmur this time containing a note of protest. He prevented her escape by gracefully swinging one leg over her, kneeling astride her as he bent over to whisper in her ear --

"Wake up, kirei."

"Mmph," Misao replied in a sleepy, petulant tone, eyes still shut. Sano chuckled, his brain clicking through a host of ways in which he could persuade her to rejoin him in the waking world.

"Misao..." he whispered, exhaling in her ear, then tracing its recesses with the tip of his tongue. The sound she made this time was equal parts objection and encouragement. Sano switched to her opposite ear, giving it the same treatment, smiling as Misao sighed softly.

"Wake up," he urged again, slowly running his hands down the sides of her breasts. Her nipples tightened instantly, and Sano growled low in his throat, his body stiffening at the sight of her swift reaction to his touch. \_So... she's not as deeply asleep as she'd like me to think... the little weasel...\_

Thoughts of waking her slowly vanished in the face of his sudden, overpowering lust for her. He lowered his mouth to one breast, engulfing it, his tongue swirling wildly around its engorged peak. Misao gasped, her eyes snapping open as she raised herself up slightly to look at him. Sano's eyes darted upward to meet hers. Wordlessly, he held her with his narrowed, heated gaze as he continued to ravish her.

"Ahh," she cried, bucking as his teeth closed around her breast. She grabbed his head, and Sano waited for her to yank him off her... probably even yell at him for being too rough. Instead, her fingers sank deeply into his hair, pushing his head against her chest as she ordered him breathlessly --

"Sano... harder..."

Sano sucked deeply on her breast in reply, eliciting a guttural moan from Misao. She grabbed his hand and placed it on her other breast, her fingers entwined with his as they caressed her together. She then guided his hand slowly down her torso and into the tangled curls that sheltered her womanhood. Sano tore himself away from Misao's breast, watching her face as she helped him stroke her. Her eyes were hot with unrestrained hunger... and she bared her teeth slightly as their fingers squeezed against her pleasure spot.

"Yes," she hissed as her hips jerked. "Right there."

"Aa," Sano grunted, his fingers tightening around hers, pressing them against her warm, wet flesh. His eyes remained locked on hers as he guided her fingers against her own body, slowly releasing the pressure of his own until she was stroking herself. He then took his hand away completely. Misao stopped touching herself, disappointment and uncertainty clouding her expression. Sano smiled and replaced her hand, kissing her deeply before murmuring --

"Keep going, love. There's a reason..."

Misao's eyes darkened with passion as she nodded, opening her legs wide as she ran her fingers over her intimate parts. Sano felt his mouth go dry and his body swell as he observed the way her sex glistened with arousal. She moaned as she found that secret place

again, her head tossing back and forth as she lost herself in the rush of sensation. Before she was too far gone, Sano lowered himself onto Misao, grabbing her shoulders and rolling with her until she was on top of him. Misao raised her head to meet Sano's eyes, comprehension finally dawning as he pressed their hips together, dipping his tongue inside her mouth as he did so.

Misao felt her blood race as Sano showed her with tongue and hands what he wanted from her. She rose to her knees, straddling Sano's hips, her lips curved into a sly smile as she took his length in her hand, squeezing it gently. Sano groaned, his eyelids flickering closed as she fondled him with feather-light fingers. Trembling, she guided his erection between her legs, lifting her hips slightly and gritting her teeth --

\_Gods, I hope it doesn't hurt this time...\_

She took him inside her slowly, sucking in a sharp, disappointed breath as her own sex burned with discomfort. Sano arched his back with an ardent moan, and Misao bit her lip to stifle her own less-than-enthused cry. Sano's eyes snapped open, and he immediately grabbed Misao's waist.

"Hurts?" he whispered.

Misao nodded, her eyes filling with tears.

"We'll stop," Sano said gently, taking her hips in his hands as if to lift her off him.

"No!" Misao shook her head vigorously, her voice small and anxious. "I mean... am I doing something wrong?"

"We both are if it's not good for you," Sano said, caressing her hips before taking her hands in his. "Misao... you don't need to prove anything to me," he continued, kissing her fingertips as he spoke. "We're going to be married... we'll have lots of time to become familiar with one another."

"But... I want you now," Misao pouted. "At least... I thought I did... but..."

Ignoring his body's clamor for release, Sano paused and considered what to do next. Despite his fair amount of experience, he had never bedded a virgin before, though his first lover had told him in detail what to expect if he ever should. She had said the first few times any woman had intercourse were only mildly enjoyable at best... and that they were far more likely to be painful and frustrating. Last night, Sano had accepted Misao's gift of herself, knowing that her first time with him was bound to be uncomfortable. But this time, he silently vowed he would do everything in his power to make sure Misao gained at least as much pleasure as he did from their joining.

Misao opened her mouth to speak, but Sano cut her off --

"Shh," he ordered softly, pressing Misao's hands to his mouth and running the tip of his tongue over and between each of her fingers. Misao watched, feeling desire stir within her once more as Sano nibbled her palms, his warm eyes caressing hers. When his teeth grazed the soft skin of her wrists, it sent a jolt of fire through

her arms and down into her belly. Misao moaned, leaning forward slightly as Sano trailed soft kisses up the inside of her arm. His hands clasped her waist, coaxing her torso toward his chest until she was almost lying on top of him. Misao instinctively shifted her legs to accommodate the motion, and her eyes widened in surprise.

"How does that feel?" Sano murmured, running a finger over Misao's slightly parted lips.

"Oh," she breathed, shifting slightly. "It's... better."

Sano smiled, pleased and relieved that they had eased her discomfort so easily. He hummed low in his throat as he ran his hands over the smooth skin covering her back, raising himself up slightly to give Misao a languid, voluptuous kiss.

"You like that?" Sano murmured, his breath hot against Misao's lips.

"Yes," Misao sighed, shifting her hips again. Something had dissolved within her... where there had been searing pain only moments before there was now only the sensation of Sano's body filling her own... and a ferocious need to bring them both to the heights they'd reached separately the night before. She rocked against him, slowly at first, a small voice in the corner of her mind whispering to be careful. But thoughts of caution fled as Sano lifted his hips against her at an angle that pressed the center of her sex firmly against the bone just above his penis, leaving her gaping with pleasure.

"There?" Sano inquired silkily, stroking Misao's buttocks.

"Gods, yes," she practically sobbed. "Ohh... Sano... don't stop... never stop..."

"Never," he agreed hoarsely. "Never, my Misao..."

As one, they increased their pace, pushing harder and faster, all thought lost in the pounding of blood and sweat and sensation. Misao's hands clenched the rumpled futon beneath their writhing bodies, and Sano covered them with his own, lacing his fingers through hers and squeezing them in rhythm with their lovemaking. Misao glanced at his face, and found herself mesmerized by his dark eyes, which held his soul in their depths. Resisting the urge to look away and hide herself, Misao returned his unguarded gaze even as their bodies continued their primitive dance.

Sano's breath caught as Misao's eyes held his in an embrace more intimate than any physical contact they had shared. Never had he looked at his partner's face during sex -- it had always seemed... inappropriate. But now... watching the face of the woman he loved in the throes of passion... he found it almost unbearably intimate. He swallowed back a shiver of inexplicable fear, reaching up to touch the shining face hovering above him.

"I love you, Misao," he whispered, tears suddenly springing to his eyes as he approached his peak.

Misao's own eyes welled at the raw emotion in Sano's voice. She opened her mouth to profess her own love... and found herself screaming instead --

"Ah... aah! Sanosuke... beloved... it's happening again..."

Misao threw her head back, her body shaking with the force of her climax. The look of fierce joy on her face was all Sano needed to throw him over the top, his groan of satisfaction mingling with Misao's shout of ecstasy. Sano could feel Misao's body convulsing around his, prolonging his own release. For endless moments they trembled and moaned together, exchanging kisses and murmured endearments. Finally, Misao collapsed onto Sano's chest, breathing hard. Sano held her tightly, feeling satisfied and more than a bit smug.

"That wasn't so bad, was it, my beauty?" he teased, nibbling her earlobe.

Misao laughed shakily. "I... never knew..." she faltered. After a moment's silence, Sano lifted her chin.

"Knew what?" he inquired, cocking an eyebrow.

Misao flushed. "I never knew... it could happen more than once..." she murmured, her eyes skipping away from his.

"Nani?" Sano frowned in puzzlement. "You mean, sex?"

"No, silly," Misao giggled, giving him a little shove. "I mean... you know..."

Sano blinked... then let loose a self-satisfied chuckle as Misao's meaning became clear. He had always suspected she would be a delightful lover... a soul as fiery and uninhibited as hers would be bound to bring the same qualities to the bedroom. \_But even so... she still surprises me.\_

"I'm glad," he said, returning Misao's shy, sidelong glance with a cocky grin. "We'll have to try that again sometime."

"How about tonight?" Misao purred, kneading his chest with a sly smile.

"Yare, yare," he laughed. "I'm a working man, remember? When am I supposed to get any rest?"

Misao pinched Sano's chest, making him jump. "What's the matter, tori-chan... can't keep up with my youthful energy?" she said with a wink.

"Youthful...? I'll show you energy," Sano growled, rolling Misao on her back and pretending to ravish her as she shrieked with laughter. He then lay his head on Misao's chest, listening to her heart beat beneath his ear as she stroked his hair.

"This is what it will be like when we're married," Misao said dreamily.

"Aa," Sano said, beaming as he planted a kiss against the side of Misao's breast.

"When?"

Sano raised his head to meet Misao's eyes. "Today?" he suggested hopefully.

Misao giggled. "Much as I'd like to... no," she said. "Jiya would kill us both... and Aoshi-sama --"

She gasped, pushing Sano away and jumping to her feet. "Chikusho!" she swore, fumbling through the mass of discarded clothing on the floor by the futon. "I completely forgot! I promised Aoshi-sama I'd pack some food for him to take on his trip back to Kyoto!"

Sano grimaced as Misao hastily donned her uniform. "Do you have to go now?" he asked.

Misao tied her sash in a clumsy bow and scrambled around on the floor. "Dammit, where's my other tabi?" she muttered. "Sano, I have to. Aoshi-sama told me he would meet me shortly after dawn... if he gets there and finds me gone, he'll start looking for me." She flashed Sano a meaningful look, to which he responded with a scowl.

"So what if he comes here?" he said, throwing the covers aside and grabbing his pants. "Let him. We've done nothing to be ashamed of, Misao."

"I know," Misao said, smiling as she held up the missing tabi. She assumed a more serious expression as she pulled on her tabi and stood up. "Datte... he probably won't see it that way," she said, pushing her tousled hair out of her face. "I'd rather not press the issue."

Sano knotted his belt and rose to his feet. "Fine," he grumbled. "Lemme at least walk you home."

Misao bit back a giggle at Sano's sulky expression. \_He looks like a little boy who's been denied a treat,\_ she thought, blushing as she imagined that look on a little boy with Sano's brown eyes and wild hair. The idea made her feel absurdly happy.

Sano shrugged into his jacket and handed Misao her cloak. She draped it over her shoulders and raised the hood to cover her unbound hair. \_Should braid it, but there's no time...\_

Sano opened the door and stood aside for Misao to exit first. She stopped short of the opening and turned to face Sano.

"I'll stay next time," she said softly. "That's a promise."

Sano touched Misao's cheek. "How about I visit you next time instead?" he said with a sly smile.

Misao returned his smile, then sighed. "We'd better go before..." she said, raising an eyebrow.

"Hai, hai," Sano muttered, ducking out the door behind Misao.

-- End of Chapter 23.5 --



## 25. These Changing Times Ch. 24

### \*\*These Changing Times\*\*

This fanfic series takes place two years after the Revenge Arc ends, in an alternate RuroKen universe. (Only because I started it well before the manga ended ^^;;) Eighteen-year-old Makimachi Misao comes to Tokyo to stay with Kenshin and Kaoru... and to put her own troubles behind her. A newly attentive Sagara Sanosuke is more than willing to distract her. Then a certain Oniwabanshuu onmitsu turns up in Tokyo to help investigate a wave of vicious armed robberies sweeping the city...

Comments and constructive criticism are always appreciated. But be warned: this fic meddles with what seem to be considered the tried-and-true romantic pairings in RuroKen (in case I didn't already make that clear). So if you read further, please be kind and keep an open mind! ^^;;

**\*\*Note:\*\*** for those who are new to the language, go to <http://home.netcom.com/~sakka/times/glossary.htm> to get information on the Japanese terms and expressions used in this chapter.

### \*\*Chapter 24 -- All Ends Well\*\*

Aoshi walked slowly through the empty streets of Tokyo, enjoying the early-morning silence. As was his custom, he'd risen just before dawn and meditated for about an hour before packing up the few things he'd brought with him. He'd settled his bill at the inn the night before so as not to hinder his journey. After weeks of cramped spaces and hoards of people, he was very much looking forward to traveling through the sparsely populated countryside for awhile.

\_Of course, Kyoto is just as crowded, but at least it's familiar. It will be good to return. But first...\_

He slowed a bit as he approached Kamiya Doujou. He'd intended to say his farewell to Misao after dinner last night, but she had insisted on seeing him off in the morning with some food for his journey... and he didn't have the heart or the energy to argue with her. As Aoshi effortlessly cleared the back gate, his stomach growled, making him glad she'd been so adamant about packing him provisions. \_She's actually turned into quite a good cook... Okon and Kuro will be pleased to hear it,\_ he thought, his mouth curving slightly in amusement.

With his trademark onmitsu stealth, Aoshi slipped up to the kitchen... and froze as he caught sight of two forms pressed together in the shadows just outside the building. He heard the soft, wet sound of mouths meeting, then Misao's strangled whisper --

"Sano... thought you were going to help me... with the food..."

Sano emitted a low, masculine chuckle. "I thought you said the food was done," he murmured.

"It is... but I have to..." Misao's voice trailed off into a low moan.

"Mm-hm?" Sano's smug tone set Aoshi's teeth on edge. "You have to what, kirei?"

"I can't remember, dammit," she hissed. "Sano... quit that..."

"What... that? Or maybe you meant... that?"

Another moan, louder this time. Aoshi felt his cheeks grow hot, and he had to use every ounce of Zen training he possessed to resist the urge to slaughter the yarou who had dared put his filthy hands on his precious, innocent Misao. Only the thought of Misao's horrified reaction kept him from doing so.

\_I know she's with him by choice... but still... I can't just let him get away with this!\_

Aoshi thought for a moment, then loudly cleared his throat. The speed with which Sano and Misao jumped apart -- and the brief expression of terror that crossed Sano's face as he caught sight of Aoshi -- helped satisfy the onmitsu's need for revenge.

"Eeto... Aoshi-sama..." Misao stammered, her face beet-red as she straightened her rumpled uniform and pushed her unbraided hair out of her face. Her disheveled appearance, as well as the cloak laying in a heap behind her, told Aoshi as plainly as words where she'd spent the night. He was mortified at the thought, and cursed himself for a high-minded, sentimental fool. \_How many times do I have to tell myself she's not a child anymore?\_

Aoshi drew a deep breath. "Where is that food you promised me, Misao?" he said, keeping his tone light.

Misao stared at him, then smiled hesitantly. \_Not even a lecture? Aoshi-sama, you \*have\* changed...\_

"It's almost ready," she said. "Give me one minute." She squeezed Sano's hand and darted into the kitchen. Sano turned to follow her, but Aoshi blocked his path.

"Chotto matte, Sagara," he said in a much darker tone. When Aoshi's narrowed eyes met Sano's, the ex-gangster felt his blood run cold.

\_Shit. He's out for my blood this time.\_ He gave a mental shrug. \_Ah well... might as well go out in style...\_

Sano held Aoshi's gaze defiantly. "You want a piece of me? Fine," he said with as much bravado as he could muster. "But we should go somewhere else... I don't want Misao to see us fighting."

Aoshi sighed in exasperation. "Much as I'm tempted by your offer... I must decline," he said, adding pointedly --

"For Misao's sake."

"Yeah, yeah," Sano grumbled, waving a hand dismissively. "Whatever. So... what do you want from me, then?"

Aoshi paused, considering. "Have you told Misao of your intentions

yet?" he asked.

"He has."

Misao stepped out of the kitchen, holding up a large bundle. "This should get you as far as Hakone," she said, handing the bundle to Aoshi. She then approached Sano, taking his hand as she faced Aoshi again.

"Sano has asked me to marry him," she said. "And I have accepted his proposal."

Aoshi silently regarded Misao's determined stance... the upward tilt of her chin... the blend of fear and resolve in her aqua eyes. Sano moved to stand directly behind Misao, resting his hands on her shoulders possessively.

"I know we're not exactly doing things the way we should," he said. "And I know you don't approve. But we love each other."

"I know," Aoshi said, his eyes fixed on Misao. "You know my misgivings," he said to her. "But if this is really what you want..."

"It is," she said quietly, reaching up and covering one of Sano's hands with her own. "More than anything."

Aoshi closed his eyes briefly against the bewildering sensation of loss that surged within his breast. \_My little Misao... how I wish I could keep you a child forever. But that isn't to be... so...\_

His eyes snapped open. "Then... you have my blessing," he said slowly.

Misao launched herself at Aoshi, throwing her arms around his waist and nearly knocking the food-bundle out of his hands.

"Arigatou," she whispered fiercely. "Honto ni, arigatou, Aoshi-sama..."

Aoshi awkwardly set the bundle down and returned Misao's hug. "I'll tell Okina, if you wish," he said, absently stroking her hair.

Misao drew away from him, wiping her eyes and nodding. "Tell Jiya to expect a letter from me, too," she said. "Sano will soon be finished work for the winter, and I've invited him to stay with us in Kyoto until the spring. We'll talk about the arrangements then."

Aoshi nodded, glancing at Sano, who returned the onmitsu's gaze just as warily. \_Hopefully I'll be able to resign myself to his presence by then,\_ Aoshi thought with a quiet sigh.

\_Hopefully I'll be able to stomach the sight of him by then,\_ Sano thought simultaneously, gritting his teeth against the jealousy that had seethed within him as he watched Misao and Aoshi embrace.

Aoshi opened his traveling sack and stuffed the food bundle inside. He rose to his feet and gave Misao a faint smile.

"I'll see you soon, then" he said. "Ki o tsukete, Misao."

"Safe journey, Aoshi-sama," she said, beaming. As Aoshi turned to leave, he called over his shoulder --

"Take good care of her, Sagara... or I will be taking you up on your offer next time we meet."

"Wakatta," Sano replied with a grin. "Ja na, Shinomori."

Misao watched as Aoshi climbed over the back gate and disappeared. She smiled as Sano embraced her from behind, sagging against him with a grateful sigh.

"I'm glad that's settled," she said.

"Aa," Sano agreed fervently as Misao turned around in his arms, pressing her face to his chest. "Now there's nothing standing in our way," he whispered as she raised her eyes to his.

"Nothing," she echoed, standing on tiptoe to kiss him. A few long moments later, a sharp whistle interrupted them.

"Oi, don't you guys ever come up for air?" Yahiko called, grinning at them as he tried to keep hold of a squirming Kintou. Kenshin and Kaoru were standing behind him, each holding a sleeping infant and wearing a weary smile.

Sano beamed at them as he put an arm around Misao. "I'm glad you guys are up," he said, looking down at Misao, who smiled at him encouragingly as he continued --

"We have something important to tell you."

.....

Okina set aside Misao's letter, his brow furrowed. To say he was shocked by its contents would be an understatement. He'd hoped that Misao's trip to Tokyo would help her heart heal, allowing her to finally put aside her devotion to Aoshi. But when Aoshi so readily agreed to meet Saitou in Tokyo, Okina had allowed himself to hope that his okashira would mend the rift with Misao... perhaps even accept her love.

The last thing he expected was for Misao to be returning to Kyoto with Sagara Sanosuke as her intended. Okina closed his eyes with a weary sigh.

\_It happened so quickly... can it be real love? Misao assures me it is, but...\_

After all the pain Misao had endured in her brief lifetime, Okina was loathe to raise objections to her choice of a mate... though he had plenty. \_A penniless peasant who was a rebel traitor and gangster... and remains a gambler and layabout. What if he played on Misao's vulnerabilities and is looking for an easy living?\_

Of course, Himura Kenshin had vouched for the young rascal on many occasions, and Okina had to admit Sanosuke had charmed him -- and everyone else at the Aoiya -- by the end of Himura-tachi's stay in

Kyoto. Also, he had proven himself a loyal comrade in battle on countless occasions -- even Aoshi had acknowledged as much.

Okina picked up the letter again and re-read the last few lines. He could almost hear Misao's bubbly voice speaking them --

\_... I know you, Jiya. You're probably worrying right now, wondering if I'm really in love with Sano and ready to marry him. Please believe me... our love for each other is deep and true and has only grown through our many trials these past few months. There is no other man in the world I'd rather spend the rest of my life with. Remember that when you see us... and try to go easy on him, ne?\_

"Okina. You wished to see me?"

Okina hastily folded the letter and tucked it into his vest. "Come in, Aoshi," he said, motioning to the tea setting laid out across from him. "I apologize for imposing upon you so soon after your return. Omasu is bringing us refreshments."

Aoshi nodded as he took his place. Omasu arrived almost immediately, bearing a heavily laden tray. She silently served the men, bowed and exited so quickly Aoshi barely had a chance to thank her. He raised an eyebrow at Okina.

"I told Omasu I didn't want any disturbances," Okina explained. "The matter I have to discuss with you is of utmost importance."

"You want to discuss Misao and Sagara Sanosuke, correct?"

Okina stared at Aoshi, who calmly sipped his tea, his expression as unfathomable as ever. "How long have you known?" the old man sputtered.

"I have known Misao and Sagara had grown close since I first arrived in Tokyo," Aoshi said placidly. "I did not know the extent of their feelings until recently."

"So... you know that Misao intends to marry him," Okina said, scowling.

"Aa. They told me as much," Aoshi said.

"And you have no objections to their match?"

Aoshi set his cup down and met Okina's eyes. "I have some," he admitted. "I shared my concerns with both of them when I found out what their intentions were. But they weren't swayed."

"Young fools," Okina muttered. He started to say more, but Aoshi interrupted him --

"Okina, I understand your misgivings... I'm sure they're the same as mine. But one thing is for certain -- they truly are in love." Aoshi took a deep breath, forcing himself to continue. "Sagara... has made his feelings for Misao quite clear in both word and deed... and he has taken steps to make himself a worthy husband. And Misao..."

Aoshi faltered as he pictured Misao's glorious smile after he'd given her marriage plans his approval. He swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat, adding in a strong voice --

"Misao is happier than I've ever seen her, Okina. Because of Sagara. All my objections seemed insignificant in the face of her joy... so I have given her my blessing. I ask that you do the same."

Okina's breath caught at Aoshi's impassioned speech. It had been a long, long time since Okina had heard Aoshi express himself so freely -- it made Okina bolder than he would have been otherwise.

"I will do as you ask -- if you answer a question for me," Okina said.

Aoshi hesitated, then nodded.

"Are you sure about this, Aoshi?" Okina asked gently. "Your eyes tell me you have regrets."

Aoshi paused as he recalled the countless hours of pondering the same question on his return journey to Kyoto... and the answer that had come to him.

"My only regret is hurting Misao for as long as I did," he said in a low, hoarse voice. "And I have other... more selfish... regrets." He held up his still-bandaged left arm. Okina nodded sympathetically.

"Himura told us of your injury," he said. "Have you regained any control over it?"

"Some," Aoshi said. "I am able to hold a cup for a few moments before dropping it. But Takani-sensei tells me it will be a long time before we know the full extent to which I am disabled. I almost certainly will have to return to single-sword combat... we'll see if it affects my kempo as well."

"If there's anything we can do to help..." Okina said.

"Arigatou," Aoshi replied. "I'll let you know." He fell silent again for a moment, remembering the battle with Tousei. His lip curled slightly as he remembered how badly Tousei had hurt Misao.

"No... I cannot even regret this crippled arm," he said with sudden passion. "To regret that would be to regret my reason for the fight which gave me the injury. Just as to regret hurting Misao is to regret loving her so much that I did whatever I could to spare her pain."

Ignoring Okina's befuddled gaze, Aoshi continued --

"That is the answer I have found. I still live to serve the Oniwabanshuu, to whom I owe my life, for as long as they still exist and I am physically able. But above all, I will do anything... anything... to protect Misao's happiness. I promised that to Sorata-san long ago... and I renewed that vow in Tokyo." His voice thickened almost imperceptibly. "I will miss her... terribly... once she leaves us to make her new life with Sagara. But my vow gives me the strength to let her go."

Okina felt his eyes mist as he regarded the handsome young man seated across from him. \_So this is the man that has lay behind the impassive mask all these years... he reminds me of the strong, passionate boy I used to know so many years ago. Shinomori Aoshi...\_

"If you can put aside your regrets... then I can as well," Okina said, smiling. "I will give Misao and Sagara Sanosuke my blessing when they arrive." He set his untouched tea back on the tray and rose to his feet. "Misao didn't say when to expect them," he said to Aoshi.

"Probably in about three weeks' time," Aoshi said. "Misao wants to make arrangements as soon as possible."

"I suppose that's our little Misao," Okina chuckled. "Once she sets her mind to something, it gets done, and quickly. But if she thinks she's going to sneak off and get married in some quick civil ceremony, she's in for a rude awakening!"

Okina laughed heartily as he exited the room. Despite his best efforts, Aoshi couldn't help smiling as well.

.....

The appointed day dawned clear and bright, the warm spring air sweetly scented with sakura petals. Misao leaned out the window, breathing deeply, eyes closed in rapture. \_The weather is perfect. I'm glad we waited after all...\_

A sharp rap sounded on Misao's door, followed by Omasu's anxious voice. "Misao-chan? Are you awake?"

"Hai... ohairi!" Misao called. Omasu and Okon entered, their arms laden with boxes.

"Don't look so worried... we have plenty of time," Misao said, beaming. "Now, what should we do first?"

"Why don't you put on your underclothing... then we'll do your hair and makeup," Okon said briskly. "We'll save your kimono for last, so that we don't spill anything on it."

Misao agreed cheerfully and submitted herself to her friends' ministrations. Normally, such attention would have driven her crazy with impatience, but the importance of the occasion -- as well as her own utter happiness -- quelled any urge Misao might have had to rush things along. This was one day where she wanted to look her absolute best.

The three women chatted and laughed while they worked, although Misao caught Okon dabbing her eyes with her sleeve more than once. Misao smiled, feeling her own eyes mist as she remembered how readily Okon had assumed a motherly role toward an orphaned young girl... and how she and Omasu had become as older sisters to her in the years that followed.

"There," Okon said, pushing the final hairpin in place while Omasu

finished painting Misao's lips with rouge. "Now for your kimono."

Misao felt a lump rise in her throat as Okon removed the white silk garment from its lacquered box and shook it out. The kimono that Misao's mother had worn at her own wedding was embroidered with rich gold thread that shone in the morning light. The patterns weren't completely distinct, but Misao could make out the characters for fidelity and luck hidden within the garment's weave, as well as a crane standing amid shafts of bamboo. The elegant flow of the design was a testament to the kimono's superb craftsmanship.

"It's beautiful," Misao whispered, blinking back the threatening tears. \_Kaa-san... if only you and tou-san could see me in it...\_

"Makimachi Misao, don't you dare cry now!" Omasu said sternly, squeezing Misao's hands. "You'll ruin your makeup!"

Misao laughed. "Gomen nasai," she said brightly. "I promise that's the last time."

"I doubt that," Okon said wryly. "But if you can make it through the ceremony with dry eyes, I'll be satisfied. Now let's get you dressed."

After what seemed like hours of pulling and prodding, Okon and Omasu released Misao and backed away a few steps to look at her. "Utsukushii..." Omasu sighed, clasping her hands together.

"Indeed," Okon said, her eyes brightening again. "Misao-chan, you're the very image of your mother. She would be so pleased..."

"Oi," Misao said gruffly as the two women sniffled. "If I can't cry, then neither can you guys! You'll just get me started again..."

Laughing, Omasu pulled Misao toward the looking-glass hanging on the wall of the inn's room. "Take a look at our handiwork," she said with a wink.

Misao gaped at the beautiful, regal-looking woman staring back at her from the mirror. "Oh," she breathed, snapping her mouth shut as she remembered Okon's endless lectures about keeping her lips together when she spoke or laughed. She turned her head this way and that, marveling at how a few hair ornaments, a little face powder and some lip color could make a person look so different.

\_Gods, Sano won't even recognize me!\_ she thought, her heart fluttering as she imagined his shock when he saw her. She always took a bit more care with her appearance when she and Sano went out on dates, but in the months they'd spent together, they had seen each other in every light and under every possible circumstance. To know that she still had the power to surprise her lover was a very pleasant thought indeed.

"Hmm... such a wicked smile, Misao-chan," Omasu teased. "You must be thinking about your wedding night."

Misao winked before assuming a more prim expression. "I don't know



what you're talking about," she said, blinking innocently.

All three erupted into giggles. "Well... you're already well-prepared for that part of married life," Omasu said with an answering wink.

"Not as well-prepared as I'd have liked," Misao grumbled. "Aoshi-sama hasn't made it easy for us these past few months."

"He was just trying to protect you," Okon said sensibly as she put the last brush away. "You'll always be his little Misao, after all."

"I know, I know," Misao said, rolling her eyes. She really did appreciate how much more visibly affectionate Aoshi had become toward her... but by the time they had all left for Tokyo a few weeks ago, she was finding his big-brotherly ways more exasperating than endearing. And his interference certainly hadn't helped her efforts to get Sano and Aoshi to warm up to each other. \_They still act like enemies forced into an uneasy truce...\_

"It doesn't help that Aoshi-sama and Sanosuke dislike each other so much," Okon went on with a sigh. "I suppose that can't be helped, though."

"Do you really think so?" Misao asked, her voice anxious. "I keep hoping things will change, but..."

"They are complete opposites, so I doubt they'll ever truly get along," Omasu said. "But once you and Sanosuke are married, Aoshi-sama will have to ease up a little. Ne, Okon?"

"I think so," Okon said, setting the stack of boxes in a corner. "There's time enough to worry about that later... right now, we need to leave for the shrine. Are you ready, Misao-chan?"

Misao pushed aside her worries and beamed at her surrogate sisters. "Hai. Ikimasho," she said, her kimono rustling as she slowly exited the room.

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"Will you stop that pacing and sit down! You're making me dizzy!"

Sano flinched and glared at his tormentor, who smirked in reply from his seat in the grass. "You know, oyaji... having you here was Misao's idea, not mine," the younger man growled.

Higashidani Kamishimoemon grinned up at his agitated son. "And I'm here because your lovely Misao-chan invited me," he replied, his eyes twinkling mischievously. "You certainly didn't think I'd come for \*your\* sake, did you?"

Sano clenched his fists and advanced on his father, only to be brought up short by Kenshin stepping in front of him. "Maa, maa, Sano," the red-haired man said, extending his hands in a placating gesture. "Your father is only teasing you. Surely you don't want a fight on your wedding day?"

"Hmph. Guess you're right," Sano grumbled, his black ceremonial kimono rustling as he resumed his restless circuit around the grounds of the old shrine. Kamishimoemon sighed and puffed his pipe.

"Never took him to be the nervous type," the old man said to Kenshin. "What, is he afraid his pretty one will change her mind after all?"

"Sano just wants everything to be perfect," Kenshin said, smiling as he remembered his own pre-wedding jitters. "He'll calm down once Misao-dono arrives."

Kamishimoemon chuckled. "She's quite a prize," he said, winking as he deliberately raised his voice. "Still hard for me to believe my no-account son ended up with such a good match."

"Why not?" Sano shot back as his wanderings brought him back near the two men. "I mean, stranger things have happened. Like my mother marrying you, for instance..."

Kamishimoemon laughed heartily at that. "Too true," he grinned, rising to his feet and slapping Sano on the back. "Your mother was a beautiful, gracious woman... why she picked an oaf like me, I'll never guess."

Sano smiled knowingly at his father. "Love is a strange thing," he said with a shrug.

"Aa," Kenshin agreed, winking at Kaoru as she hurried toward the group with Misako in her arms and an excited smile on her face.

"I just saw everyone leaving the Midori-ya," she said breathlessly. "Are the priests here yet?"

"They're preparing the place where the ceremony will be held," Kenshin replied, his eyes warm as he gazed at his wife. "You look lovely, Kaoru."

Kaoru blushed. "So do you, anata," she said shyly. She had regained her usual trim figure and was wearing the blue and white kimono Misao had brought from Kyoto many months ago, as Kenshin was wearing the clothes that had been Misao's gift to him. "Where are Kenji and Kintou?" she asked.

As if in answer, Kintou's clear, pealing laugh rang through the nearby woods, followed by Yahiko's exasperated shout --

"Dammit! Give that back to me right now, Kintou!"

The adults started laughing as Kintou came running into the clearing, clutching Yahiko's sandal to his chest and giggling gleefully. Yahiko, red-faced, was hopping after him on one foot, while Yutarou and Outa followed behind, doubled over with laughter. Tsubame was the last to appear, holding Kenji and stifling her own giggles.

Kenshin reached out and grabbed Kintou with trademark Hiten Mitsurugi Ryuu swiftness. "Got you!" he crooned in a singsong tone, making Kintou laugh and squeal with delight. Kenshin managed to pry the sandal from his son's hands by offering him a handful of his red mane in its place.

"Here you are, Yahiko," Kenshin said cheerfully, handing the sandal to Yahiko, who took it with sullen, muttered thanks.

"Don't be angry, Yahiko-kun," Tsubame said, smiling sweetly at the young swordsman. "Today is a happy occasion, ne?"

Yahiko smiled sheepishly. "Uhm," he nodded, admiring the way the dappled light illuminated Tsubame's light brown hair and delicate features. \_She sure looks pretty today... I'll have to tell her so later... when there aren't so many nosy people around...\_

As the others chatted and laughed, Sano breathed deeply, feeling at peace for the first time that day. It was his wedding day... the weather was fine... and he was surrounded by his friends and family. And soon he would be joined forever with the woman he loved with every fiber of his being.

Sano turned to his father, who was mussing Outa's hair affectionately, despite the 9-year-old's embarrassed protests. "You're right, oyaji," he said gruffly. "I've been acting foolish. There's no need for worry, is there?"

Kamishimoemon regarded Sano soberly. "Boy, why don't you go play for a minute while I talk to your big brother?" he said, swatting Outa on the behind and sending him scampering. Sano held up his hands as if to ward his father off.

"Matte! That wasn't an invitation for some deep father-son talk or anything," the younger man stammered.

"Too bad," his elder snorted. "Some occasions call for a little fatherly wisdom, so shut up and take it like a man."

Sano ground his teeth, wishing for the thousandth time that he'd lied when, as they planned their wedding, Misao asked him if he had any family still living. \_But considering how mad she was that I hadn't told her sooner... it's probably better that I told her the truth. It would've come out sooner or later...\_

"Look, Sanosuke, I know we've had our differences," Kamishimoemon said, puffing his pipe. "But I must say that you've grown up well, despite your street-rat lifestyle."

"Oi!" Sano snapped.

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" Kamishimoemon insisted. "Anyway... what I'm saying is, I know life's been hard for you. So by my thinking, your marrying Misao-chan is your reward. So stop worrying like you don't deserve this kind of happiness. You do. And so does she."

Sano stared at Kamishimoemon. "Not bad, oyaji," he said with a wry smile. "That even made sense."

"Good," Kamishimoemon replied, grinning in return. "Let's go see if those priests have managed to get rid of all the evil spirits around here."

Sano chuckled. "Obviously not -- we're still here, aren't we?" he smirked. The two men laughed as they headed for the clearing

designated for the ceremony. As they spoke with the priests, the guests started making their way to the mats laid out for them on the ground. An excited voice called out --

"Sanosuke-niichan! Minna! She's coming!" Uki ran into the clearing, followed closely by Ayame and Suzume, while Genzai-sensei, Megumi and Tatsuya approached at a more sedate pace.

Kenshin took his place in front, standing between the small tables laid out for bride and groom. He bowed deeply to the priests, who returned the gesture solemnly. "This place is now cleansed," said the elder of the two.

"Arigatou de gozaru yo," Kenshin replied. The priests nodded as they took their places behind Kenshin, who motioned to Sanosuke. The groom swallowed and smoothed the front of his kimono before moving to stand next to his best friend. Kenshin smiled serenely at Sanosuke, murmuring --

"Daijoubu de gozaru ka, Sano?"

"Aa," the taller man replied, turning his head as he caught sight of the approaching bridal party. Okina came first, tugging his beard and nodding at Sanosuke before taking his place behind the bride's seat. Kuro and Shiro sat behind Okina... Shiro giving Sano a broad grin and a wink before dropping to his mat. Okon and Omasu settled on either side of the men, giggling as they watched Sano's eyes widen and his jaw drop.

Aoshi escorted Misao, who seemed borne aloft on a cloud of white. She had eschewed the customary veil, though she did wear the ceremonial bridal headdress, her hair swept up beneath it with numerous pins and combs. The white powder on her face highlighted her high cheekbones and dainty nose... the rouge on her lips emphasized their lushness. Her shining eyes met Sano's, and he forgot to breathe.

\_That splendid creature is to be my wife? Oh, Misao... you never cease to amaze me...\_

He licked his suddenly dry lips in anticipation. Misao's red lips curved upward in a dainty smile as Aoshi led her to her seat at the small table next to Sano's. Aoshi's eyes met Sano's gravely, and both men acknowledged each other with a brief nod. Sano knelt before his table, facing Kenshin solemnly.

"It is my privilege to open this ceremony whereby Sagara Sanosuke and Makimachi Misao will be joined in marriage before the gods," Kenshin intoned.

The priests began chanting and waving their plumed wands to rid the space of evil and call in fortune. Misao snuck a glance at her husband-to-be, so serious and handsome in his deep black robes. As she had requested, he was wearing his red silk headband -- she knew it was probably inappropriate, but she told him that it was so much a part of who he was that she couldn't bear the thought of him being without it during this most important of ceremonies. Her eyes misted as she remembered his fierce embrace and choked reply --

\_... Misao... I've never loved you more than I do right now...\_

Misao's resplendent image hung before Sano's eyes as the priests continued chanting offerings to the gods. His mind reeled back to the day she had returned to Tokyo... how he'd admired her from afar before realizing who she was... how lively and adorable she'd been with him after he recognized her. He later realized he'd begun falling in love with her that very day, though he had refused to acknowledge the strength of his feelings until weeks later, when he'd caught her crying in the garden the morning after the Akabeko was attacked. He'd told her as much when, much later on, she asked him when he had realized he was in love with her... and Sano's throat tightened as he remembered Misao's heartfelt reply when he asked her the same question --

\_... It was that same night. I didn't know at the time, but the real reason I was crying was because you were replacing Aoshi-sama in my heart. It frightened me, that you could have the same power to hurt me that he had... but when you treated me with such tenderness in the face of your own troubles, I knew things would be different with you. That's when I fell in love with you, Sagara Sanosuke... and I know now that the feelings we share are eternal...\_

Kenshin poured sake into the first of three cups set on the low table behind him. He handed the first cup to Misao, who grasped it with trembling hands. She drank three times, then passed the cup back to Kenshin, who set it on the table to refill it. Misao glanced sidelong at Sano as he took the proffered cup, his hands no steadier than Misao's had been. A thrill ran up her spine as she saw his lips touch the reddened imprint she'd left on the cup. She shivered as she imagined his mouth devouring hers, wiping all traces of her lip color away with a passionate sweep of his tongue.

Sano felt the blood rush to his loins as he tasted the sweetness of Misao's lip rouge on the rim of the sake cup. He pictured his hands pulling the ornaments from her hair... pushing the kimono off her shoulders... laying her onto their marriage bed. With a swift mental shake, he finished his third sip and returned the cup to Kenshin, who set it aside and filled the second cup, this time handing it to Sano first, then Misao. As Misao took her three sips, she thought she could almost taste Sano's lips on the cup... and the notion made her blush beneath her white face powder.

After the bride and groom had drunk from the third cup, completing the sansankudo binding ritual, they rose to their feet, turned and bowed to the assembly, which shouted in unison --

"Omedetou gozaimasu!"

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The wedding banquet at the Akabeko was a boisterous affair. Sake flowed like water as the guests raised toast after toast to Sano and Misao, who had changed from her wedding finery into a gray silk kimono patterned with pink sakura branches. As they heard each person's fond remembrances and best wishes for their future, the couple clasped hands, exchanging happy smiles.

Kenshin was one of the last to speak. He rose to his feet, clearing his throat. "All of you know Sano and I met under... less than friendly circumstances," he said, eliciting laughter and nods from

the crowd. "And my first encounter with Misao-dono when was she tried to relieve me of my sword," he added, winking at Misao, who blushed as the laughter increased. Kenshin's own smile grew pensive as he continued.

"But in the years since, both have proven to be the truest of friends, without whom my life likely would have taken a different path... or ended... long before I found happiness with my wife and family." His voice caught as he declared --

"To Sagara Sanosuke and Makimachi Misao... may they enjoy as least as much happiness as Kaoru and I now share. Kampai!"

"Kampai!" the guests shouted, lifting their sake cups. Sano swallowed past the lump of emotion Kenshin's eloquent tribute had caused and glanced at his bride, who was dabbing her eyes gingerly with her sleeve. He squeezed her hand, wanting to embrace her but knowing such overt displays would have to wait until they were in more private surroundings. She smiled reassuringly, her eyes warm with affection. As they gazed at each other, they thought in unison --

\_Soon we will be alone... as husband and wife...\_

Their smiles widened in anticipation.

But as day faded into night, and the party showed no sign of winding down, the newlyweds began to despair of ever escaping. There were gifts to be received, greetings to be exchanged, drunken relations to be placated. Okina and Kamishimoemon took to each other as if they were long-lost brothers -- after opening their third jug of sake, they wouldn't let Sano rest until he agreed to join them in a drinking game. Normally, Sano would have cheerfully complied, but with every swig of sake he felt his hoped-for wedding night slipping further and further away.

"Sanosuke looks absolutely miserable," Kaoru whispered to Kenshin with a giggle.

"Aa," he replied with a chuckle. "I've never seen Sano drink sake so grudgingly." A sly smile replaced his usual good-natured expression. "I think we owe him an escape route... ne, koishii?"

Kaoru's eyes sparked with mischievous glee. "Leave it to me, anata," she murmured, squeezing his knee before rising gracefully and crossing the room. She approached Okon first, whispering in her ear. The older woman smiled knowingly and motioned to Omasu. Kenshin chuckled again, grateful that he wasn't the object of the women's scheming.

Misao, meanwhile, was becoming extremely agitated. \_Damn those old drunkards! How dare they steal Sano from me tonight, of all nights!\_ She laughed politely at whatever joke Uki had told Tsubame and Yahiko, wishing with all her heart she could just grab Sano and drag him off to their wedding chamber. But there was no way Okina or Kamishimoemon would let them get away so easily.

\_They'll make a scene... embarrass us completely. I just know it! Chikusho... what are we gonna do?\_

She felt a hand squeeze her shoulder. "Misao-chan," Megumi said, her

cinnamon-brown eyes alight with mischief. "I'm stepping out for a breath of air. Would you like to join me?"

Misao raised an eyebrow. "Uh... sure," she said, following the doctor toward the back of the restaurant. As they ducked behind the curtain, Misao heard Kaoru, Okon and Omasu pleading --

"O~kina! Higashidani-san! How about a little music? We'll sing backup with you... onegaiiii?"

Misao managed to stifle her laughter until Megumi had spirited her unnoticed out the back door. "Wait right here," Megumi said with a foxlike grin, ducking back into the restaurant.

Not more than ten minutes later, Kuro and Katsu poked their heads outside... winked at Misao... and opened the door to reveal a grinning Sano. Misao heedlessly threw her arms around Sano's neck, kissing him before whispering --

"How?"

"We left a decoy in my place," Sano said, stepping back from Misao and pointing to his clothing... which looked exactly like the gi and hakama Shiro had been wearing. "Shiro was good enough to agree to stand in for me," he continued. "A quick clothing switch, a little work with his hair and no one knew the difference."

Misao burst out laughing "Shiro looks nothing like you!" she protested.

"Yeah, I know... he's not as tall and definitely not as handsome," Sano said with a broad wink at Kuro, who sniggered. "But those old coots are so drunk they can't even see straight... and they're too busy serenading everyone to care. They won't miss me until I'm long gone."

"Speaking of which..." Katsu said, waving his hand in a shooing motion. "You two better get out of here." He smiled at Sano and handed him a lantern. "You know where you're headed, right?"

"Aa. Doumo," Sano said as Misao gave each of the men a quick embrace and a kiss on the cheek, then disappeared with Sano into the night.

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"Here we are," Sano said, pulling Misao to a stop and pointing to a small cabin in the woods near the shrine where their marriage had taken place.

"Sano, how did you know about this place?" Misao gasped as Sano unlocked the door.

"It's Katsu's," he said, opening the door. "He built it when he had all that money from painting -- he said he likes to use it when he needs to get away from people for awhile." He beckoned to Misao. "C'mon... this is Katsu's wedding gift to us. He knew we'd get harassed if we stayed at the doujou or the Midori-ya."

"We'll have to thank him later," Misao murmured, taking Sano's hand

and stepping over the threshold. Sano hung the lantern on a hook in the wall, where it illuminated the small space with its flickering light. Misao turned in a slow circle, taking in the carefully arranged flowers... the tea setting laid out near the open fireplace... and the opened futon, piled high with quilted covers. She also noticed a small door in the back of the room. She turned questioning eyes to Sano, who answered --

"That's the bathhouse."

"Katsu thinks of everything, doesn't he?" Misao said with a slow, sensual smile.

"Aa," Sano replied, his voice a low, pleased thrum. "We'll have time enough for that later. Right now, why don't I help you undress... my wife."

Misao's heart hammered crazily at Sano's last words. "By all means... honorable husband," she purred. "If you'll allow me to assist you as well."

Sano beamed as he took Misao in his arms. "Let's start with your makeup," he murmured before covering her rouged lips with his own.

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Kenshin smiled sleepily at Kaoru as she finished tucking the children into the futon next to theirs. "It was a good day, wasn't it, koishii?" he said with a yawn.

"It was," she said, lifting the covers and sliding into bed. "Almost as fine as our wedding day."

Kenshin laughed quietly as Kaoru snuggled up to him. He put his arm around her and pulled her closer, whispering --

"I meant what I said tonight, Kaoru. If Sano and Misao-dono are as happy together as you and I, they'll have much to be grateful for."

"They will be," Kaoru said confidently. "I've never seen either of them so happy as they are when they're together. They're a good match."

"I remember when you didn't think so highly of their pairing," Kenshin observed teasingly, earning a protesting swat from his wife.

"Mou! You know Sano was a freeloader and a womanizer before he started seeing Misao-chan," Kaoru huffed. "You can hardly blame me for being skeptical."

"True. I was equally as uncertain as to whether Misao-dono would turn away from Aoshi," Kenshin mused. "Much had to change before she and Sano found each other."

Kaoru laid her hand over Kenshin's heart. "It was sort of the same with us, ne?" she said softly.



"Sort of," Kenshin agreed, kissing Kaoru's forehead. As his eyelids grew heavy, he heard Kaoru murmur --

"Times certainly have changed, haven't they, Kenshin?"

"Aa," he replied with a broad smile. "For the better, thankfully."

~ Owari ~

End  
file.